

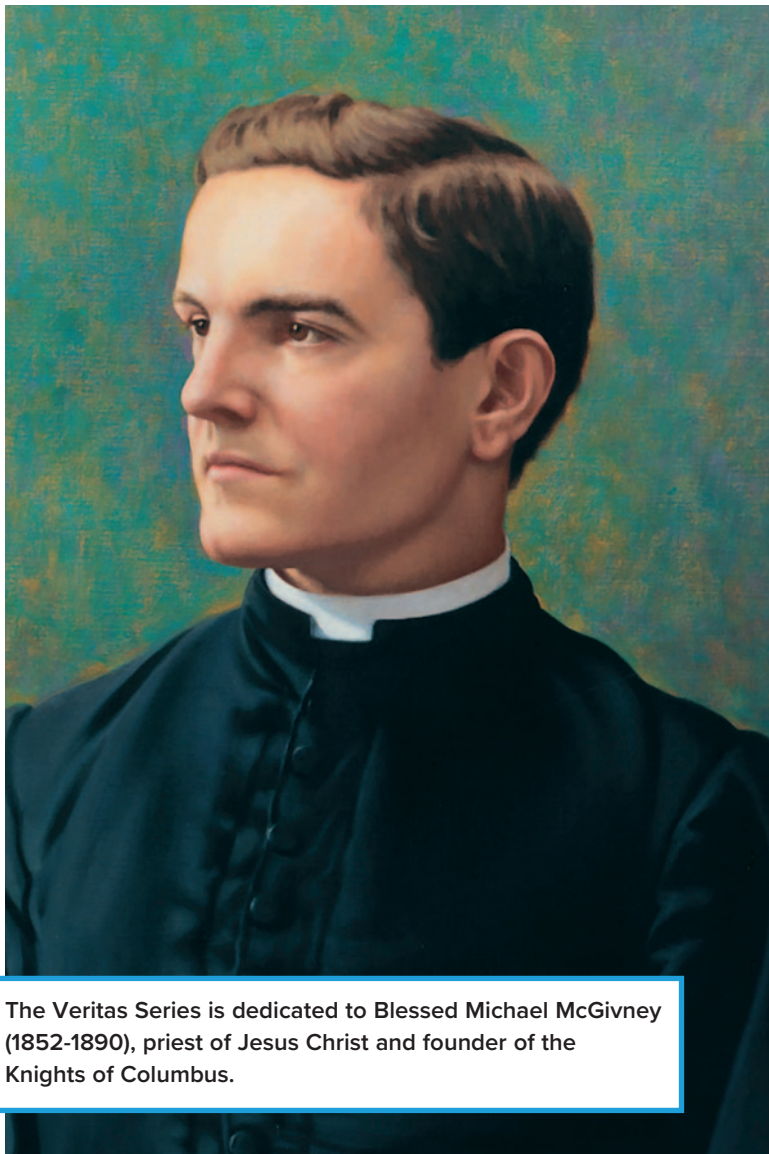


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# God's Story of Creation

Father Bruce Vawter, C.M.



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# God's Story of Creation

BY

FATHER BRUCE VAWTER, C.M.

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# I

## NO CONFLICT BETWEEN SCIENCES AND GENESIS

This booklet has been written for two classes of people, but with one purpose. The purpose is simply stated: it is to explain the meaning of the so-called “prehistorical” sections of the book of Genesis, that is, the first eleven chapters. Necessarily, such an explanation also entails in some cases making clear what these sections do *not* mean.

The two classes for which this explanation has been made are believers and non-believers. By “believer” is understood one who accepts the inspired character of the Bible, that it is the Word of God. By “non-believer” is meant one who does not make this affirmation.

Both classes experience difficulty with Genesis, and particularly with the book’s first few chapters. Though the difficulty of each class differs, the origin of the difficulty is the same. What they read seems to clash with what the world at large now commonly admits as proved scientific fact concerning the nature of the world and of man and their beginnings.

For the believer the difficulty is one of perplexity. He has what he knows to be God’s word, the word therefore of One Who cannot be deceived, and he wonders how he is to reconcile the seeming contradictions of this word with the great fund of knowledge which modern science has made known to the world. He wants to be able to accept both the Bible and what science assures him to be fact. He wants his faith to be an intelligent faith. He has been told that there is no real conflict between faith and reason, when both are properly understood. He has the right, therefore, to see this assertion proved in the case of the book of Genesis.

The non-believer's difficulty is not always recognized by him as a difficulty. The non-believer may think that he has no difficulty whatever. Convinced that the Bible is at best a harmless collection of ancient Jewish folklore, he may think that there is no more reason that it should agree with a scientific view of the world than should Grimm's *Fairy Tales* or Aesop's *Fables*.

Of the difficulties, then, the latter may be the more harmful. At the worst, the believer may remain in his perplexity, but the non-believer may have closed his mind to the serious examination of what a large proportion of the world firmly considers to be the word of God to man – which, if this persuasion be true, tells man many things for which there is no other possible source of information.

In either case, the difficulty is occasioned by an incorrect interpretation of the meaning of Genesis. It follows that a correct interpretation of Genesis' meaning - the purpose of this booklet - is the answer to these difficulties.

Obviously a booklet of this size cannot answer every question that has arisen in this connection nor can it answer any question in considerable detail. What it can do is give a brief sketch of what modern reverent and scientific interpretations of Genesis have to say about the meaning of those chapters of the Bible that describe the origin of man and his world.

The final interpretation of Genesis – and of the vast majority of the Bible's passages – has yet to be determined. There is no "official" stamp attached to any of the explanations that are offered here. The Church leaves her scholars free to determine the meaning of the Scripture by the application of the scientific methods now available through the great advances in the world's knowledge that have taken place in the past few generations. The conclusions with the teaching of faith, they make as those who believe in a God who has revealed Himself.

This booklet can do no more than summarize what modern Christian interpreters of the Bible who believe in the Bible as God's word, which is ever capable of being better understood through the increase of men's knowledge – have concluded concerning the first eleven chapters of Genesis.



## II

### WHY GENESIS WAS WRITTEN

Dr. Albert Einstein has written that “the man who regards his own life and that of his fellow creatures as meaningless, is not merely unfortunate but almost disqualified for life.”

Though they did not express themselves in these terms, the men who wrote the Old Testament have told us that this was also their conviction. They have told us through the character of the books they wrote. And of all the books of the Old Testament, none expresses this conviction more clearly than does the book of Genesis.

Genesis is part of what today we call “the Pentateuch,” from the Greek word meaning the first *five books* of the Old Testament, which were originally joined together as a single work. The Jews called this work “the Law,” because the climax of its story, as told in Exodus and Numbers, is the revelation on Mount Sinai of the law given by God through Moses, and because much of the remainder of the five books is taken up with the specific prescriptions of the Mosaic law.

Just when the Pentateuch was divided up into the five books we now call Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, we do not know. Just when, in fact, the narratives and legislation of the Pentateuch were drawn up into their present form by their inspired authors and editors, we likewise do not know. Biblical scholars have learned a great deal about the Pentateuch during the past several generations, and today we know much more about it than was possible for our ancestors, but it is no exaggeration to say that there is more unknown than known about its history and composition.

In earlier times the answers to these questions were thought quite simple. Moses, the great lawgiver of the Hebrews, was traditionally the acknowledged

author of the Pentateuch. Today while we still speak of the Pentateuch as substantially Mosaic, meaning that much of it goes back to him as its ultimate source, we know that these books as we now have them could not have been written by him in their entirety. The Pentateuch is the result of a long process of compilation and editing, to which many inspired writers and editors of many different ages contributed. In its final form it represents what might be called a distillation of the best religious thinking of the Hebrew people, which reached its climax and conclusion in the fifth century before Christ.

To many readers, the question of the authorship of the Pentateuch, and its time of composition, may be pointless. Yet it is always important to know when and by whom a book was written, if we are to make any headway at all in understanding what the author is trying to say. This is why we know that as our knowledge of these matters increases, as it will with further study and the many means for study that are available to us in the present time, we shall in the future be able to interpret the meaning of the Pentateuch in a much more detailed and satisfactory way than we can do even now – just as today we can do so much more than those of the past were able to do.

## **The Pentateuch**

On the basis of what we now know, we can see that the Pentateuch was the attempt made by inspired authors to interpret the history of the past to the people of Israel. This history it traced from the time of Abraham, the father of the Hebrew race (1900-1800 B.C., according to the best estimates), down to the beginning of the conquest of the promised land of Palestine, after the exodus from the slavery of Egypt (sometime in the thirteenth century B.C.). All of the facts of this history were interpreted in the light of God's providence and His special consideration for the people of His choice, whom He elected to be His witnesses in the world, and from whom He would eventually call a Savior of the world.

## **Truths in History**

Thus the purpose and intention of the Pentateuch is the key to its interpretation. It was written by profoundly religious men who saw history not merely as cold facts, but as the record of God's dealing with men. It was written to tell the Hebrews who they were, how and why God had chosen them, the great things He had done for them, and what He expected of them. This religious character possessed by the Pentateuch does not lessen its historical content, but it tells us what history meant to those who wrote it. It is history not for its own sake, but history intended to teach religious truths.

The historical character of the Pentateuch enjoys great prestige today, now that we are able actually to check some of the facts that it relates. A century ago there was no science of archaeology to speak of, but today no terrain has been so thoroughly explored as that which the Bible describes. Men have dug beneath the surface of the earth to reveal the buried civilizations of the past which lived before the Pentateuch was written, and it has been discovered that they were accurately depicted in the sacred books of Israel. Records of the past in a score of ancient, forgotten languages have been brought to light and painfully deciphered, and the story they have to tell coincides marvelously with the story of the Bible. The historical sources used by the Biblical writers were amazingly correct, even to details.

The story of Abraham's migration, for example, first from Ur in southern Mesopotamia to Haran in northern Syria, and finally to Canaan or Palestine, as told in Genesis 11-12, coincides with what archaeology tells us of the movements of peoples at this time. These cities mentioned in the text, which had long since disappeared before Genesis was written, have been excavated to tell us of the thriving civilizations they once supported. The places in which Abraham is said to have lived – Sichem, Hebron, the Negeb or southern desert – are precisely the places which were inhabited in those days, as archaeology now proves. The inheritance and marriage laws reflected in Genesis 15:1-4, 16:1-2, in the story of Jacob and Laban, etc., laws which were not practiced by the Jews under the Mosaic law at the time these books were composed, we now know through the discovery of the ancient law-codes of Mesopotamia and Palestine were certainly in force during the times of the patriarchs.

The list of these coincidences could be extended indefinitely. Almost every day new evidence is forthcoming to tell us how accurate were the records upon which the Pentateuch depends. Even the most severe critics of the Bible, consequently, today have a healthy respect for the historicity of the Pentateuch.

To this historical account, Genesis 1-11 forms the introduction. Before Abraham, the first of the Hebrews, a summary is given of the origins of mankind, and the gradual narrowing down of God's providential plan until the father of the chosen people emerges.

## **Pre-Historic**

In our sense of history, these introductory chapters cannot be called historical, for they deal with the time before history began. In the sense, however, that they are an attempt to state facts, not fables, and to describe certain fundamental truths that are real and not mythical, they can be called historical.

The writers who were so careful in their selection of historical matter throughout the remainder of the Pentateuch were no less careful in what they included in this introduction.

But it is above all essential to bear in mind what purpose they intended to serve in this introduction. To write a complete history of mankind from the first year of creation was the farthest thing from their minds. To give facts for facts' sake was not their idea of writing history.

Their intention was primarily religious, and this introduction was intended by them to give the basis for the sacred history of the Hebrew people that was to follow. Among other things, these truths appear taught in these first chapters: the creation of all things by God in the beginning of time...the special creation of man as the object of God's particular providence...the unity of the human race...the original state of man's blessedness, lost through original sin...the promise of Redemption...the providential plan by which God eventually would bring about this Redemption.

All these and other religious facts, many of which depended upon divine revelation, are set forth in Genesis 1-11 under the form of a narrative. They are cloaked in highly imaginative, poetic language, containing much imagery and figures of speech. They are not, of course, the account of eyewitnesses of the facts related. Nobody was present when God created the world. They knew no more than do we the exact manner in which God brought about creation. Neither were they much interested in the question. But of the fact of creation itself they were very, very sure, and it is this fact that they intended to teach.

The remaining articles of this booklet will proceed to take up, one by one, the different religious truths which are taught in the first few chapters of Genesis. Inevitably this will mean also that we must designate a number of things which these chapters definitely do *not* teach. To some extent at least, it is almost as important to determine the latter as the former.

## No Real Conflict

We must anticipate an objection that will almost certainly be made. The interpretation that will be offered here will disagree in many ways at least with those made in bygone days. To take an example, consider the description of creation in Genesis 1:1-2:3, which poetically presents the formation of the visible world and its inhabitants in six days. The early Christians took this description at its face value. We do not. We say that while the Biblical account is true to the extent it was intended to teach truth – namely, the fact of creation itself – the details of the account need not be taken literally, but are there for various literary

reasons, most of which we can determine with fair accuracy. Why should we be right and the early Christians wrong?

There are various reasons. As Pope Pius XII has written, “for the last fifty years the conditions of Biblical studies and their subsidiaries have greatly changed,” so that “much light has been derived from these explorations for the more correct and fuller understanding of the Sacred Books.”

In the first place, our early ancestors had no particular reason to reject such a matter as a literal six-day creation. There had not then been made the scientific discoveries that have enabled us to calculate the vast age of the world. The science of geology was unknown, by which we have discovered how the world was gradually formed over a period of millions of years. In the absence of these known facts, the older commentators were following the soundest kind of interpretation in taking the account of Genesis – the only one available then in the whole world – and accepting it just as it stood.

## Changing Times

Such a process would be for us as wrong as it was right for our predecessors. We have knowledge that was lacking to them, knowledge that must be weighed and calculated in our interpretation. If we have two possible interpretations to be given anything, one of which contradicts and the other of which does not contradict another fact that we know, we can be sure that the contradictory interpretation is the wrong one. There is logic in the universe, and man’s knowledge is no exception to this rule. We cannot embrace contradictories. If a certain scientific fact is true, its contradictory cannot be true. Hence we must take into consideration, in explaining the Bible, facts which were unknown a few generations ago. This results in interpretations which obviously will differ from older ones.

Again, we know more about what the Bible is than did our predecessors. We have already said that while the average reader may think the question of the date and authorship of the sacred books does not immediately concern him, it is nevertheless a most important one. Here is a clear example of that fact.

In older times the Bible was taken as God’s word in a rather narrow sense. If Moses was the author of Genesis, and if Genesis in its first few chapters describes facts which nobody but God could know precisely, then – it was concluded – God must have *revealed* Genesis pretty much as it stands to Moses. Hence there was the tendency to interpret the first chapters of Genesis as though God had dictated every word there and, therefore, as though every word there must have an equal value.

We know now that Genesis was not written in this way at all. It was written under divine inspiration, yes, but it was not dictated by the Almighty. Inspiration implies that it contains those things which God has intended that it shall contain, and that it does not teach error, but it does not mean that the human writer was exempt from the ordinary rules of writing in the collection of his material. That is to say, the Biblical authors used source materials, written or oral, and compiled their works as other men do. The revealed facts that are contained in their work also come from these same traditional sources.

The older critics knew this in principle – as far back as the thirteenth century Saint Thomas Aquinas taught very clearly that an inspired book was no different from any other as far as the writer's industry in gathering his material was concerned. But they did not have the direct evidence we have to show that this theory is verified in practice in Genesis.

## New Discoveries

We have within the past decades unearthed some of the ancient literatures of the Middle East which flourished among the peoples of Biblical times. In numerous instances parallels have been found to parts of the Genesis account – parallels which are too similar to be the result of chance. These parallels are not the sources of the Biblical accounts, but, together with the Biblical account, they point to a more remote source from which they both descended. This is one way that the composite nature of Genesis has been shown.

Another way is from an analysis of the book itself. As we shall say later on, some stories, such as that of the Flood, for example, can quite easily be seen to consist of two or more parallel accounts of the same fact, woven together by the Biblical author. The divergences in detail between these accounts allow us to distinguish the component parts.

## What Authors Meant

What bearing does this factor have on our interpretation of Genesis? A very great one indeed. We now know that the Biblical author in many instances, far from handing on information that had been revealed to him personally, was *quoting* a traditional source, or several sources together. Our whole principle of interpretation thus changes. It is no longer so important what the passage may have originally meant, but *what the Biblical author meant by using it*.

Let us take an example from another book, where the application is easier to see. In Judges 9:7ff., Jotham tells a story to the men of Sichem which begins in

these words: “The trees once went forth to anoint a king over them; and they said to the olive tree. ‘Reign over us.’” If we take this story told by Jotham at its literal face value, we should learn that trees talk, that they elect kings for themselves, and the like. But obviously they do not. Nor does the Bible teach that they do. Nor did Jotham believe that they did. He cited the story to teach a lesson, much in the manner of the parables told by our Lord.

Now unfortunately, it was not always the policy of ancient writers to tell us as clearly as this when they were quoting. In fact, they generally did not. This quoted material in the Bible which was generally unrecognized as such by our ancestors – we have had to determine in the more painful and difficult manner mentioned above, through comparison with other ancient literature and through patient analysis of the Bible itself.

But the principle of interpretation must be applied to this material just as we instinctively apply it to Judges 9:7ff. or to Christ’s parables. The teaching of the passage is its meaning as intended by the author in his use of it. *This is the meaning of the Bible, because it is the meaning of the inspired author.*

## Can’t Be Literal

Now obviously, this makes a vast difference in our interpretation of many passages, as we shall see. It is not sufficient to say, “The Bible says so and so” and conclude that we have interpreted it. We must rather determine what the Biblical author intended to tell us when he wrote so and so. This is not subterfuge, but sensible interpretation. Even apart from an author’s use of source material, he is capable of expressions which are not to be interpreted literally, but according to the sense in which he used them.

This is what the Biblical scholars mean when they speak of the “literary forms” used by the author. A literary form is a style of writing, which must be interpreted according to its own laws. In the case we used before, we have the literary form of fable, which Jotham used to teach a lesson. It must be interpreted as a fable, not as fact, though it teaches a truth for all that. If we run across similar forms in the Bible, whether or not they are as cleanly defined as this one, they must receive a similar interpretation using the same principle.

Evidently, therefore, interpretation of the Bible does not consist in a wooden assertion, “The Bible says....” If I tell you that I saw a marvelous sunset last evening, you have no right to tell my friends that I believe – contrary to science – that the sun rises and sets. You have no right to justify your statement by retorting, “But you said...” for my statement must be interpreted according to its “literary form.” I was using an accepted figure of speech, not intended as a

scientific observation, but a popular description. There are many such things in the Bible.

All these considerations must be taken into account as we go through the initial chapters of Genesis. They are part of the “why” of Genesis. Genesis was not written to describe the world scientifically, to satisfy human curiosity as to the intimate makeup of the world and its inhabitants. It was written for an eminently religious purpose, to teach fundamental facts of theology.

It was written not by scientific men, nor for a cultivated people, but by those who utilized ancient traditional stories which described things in popular, non-scientific ways.

These facts do not lessen the truth, or the importance, of what Genesis says. They do not minimize the reverence with which we must approach the sacred book. They do not lessen its inspired character in the least, or make it any less the word of God. They do not make us “skeptics” or “rationalists” in our interpretation of the Scripture.

They work, in fact, to the opposite of all these things. For it is only by their application in a diligent pursuit of an interpretation that rests on true scientific principles that we have the chance to discover what indeed the writer intended to tell us. And only when we have found this out, do we know why and to what purpose God inspired the Scripture.

## **Man's Intellect**

Neglect of these principles does no service to truth, to the Scripture, or to God. Unless we have the real meaning of the Scripture – which is only to be discovered through the means which the God of reason has placed at our disposal – we are offering to others a cheap, shoddy vamping of our own prejudices and inclinations instead of the inspired word of God. “Fundamentalism,” or “literalism” as it is sometimes called, is not born of respect for the Bible. It is born of contempt for man's God-given intellect. The man who refuses to accept what the Bible means because, as he insists, “the Bible says” something else, deserves no more respect or sympathy than the man who refuses to believe that the earth is round, because, he insists again, the earth is flat wherever he has seen it.



### III

## GOD SAID, "LET THERE BE..."

It is the practice, even among Christians, to speak with a kind of condescension about the Old Testament's picture of God. George Bernard Shaw, a genius who was often unfortunately more interested in being witty than in being right, has a famous little book about a young girl's search for God, in which the Old Testament Jehovah who appeared in thunder and lightning demanding sacrifice, is rejected with horror. Even those who accept the Old Testament as God's word are apt to stress the primitive character of its revelation, and to remind us that the complete picture of the Deity is to be found only in the New Testament complement to the old.

Now all this is true, to a certain extent. On the other hand, we are probably far too inclined to be apologetic about the Old Testament and its picture of the Almighty.

The Jews of the Old Testament were probably the least philosophically minded people ever placed in the world. When they thought, they thought in concrete, earthy terms, not in abstractions. When they thought about God, and wrote about Him, they did so in the very same way. What they said about God often surprises us by its down-to-earth language, for we have learned nicer ways of expression. But what they said about God could have been said by no other people of antiquity, and has been equaled only by the New Testament, which was also written by latter-day Jews.

The Jews would have been unable to develop the atomic bomb. The ancient Greeks, possibly the most philosophically minded people ever to be put in the world, and from whom the scientific method evolved, we can conceive as developing the theory of nuclear fission – they had an inkling of

it, at any rate. But, centuries after the Jews were an ancient race, the Greeks were not within a million light-years of the knowledge of God that is in the Old Testament. The Greeks knew that God was spirit, that He could not literally have done some of the things that the Old Testament poetically describes Him as doing. But of everything important, they were ignorant. They did not know that God was a Person Who could be prayed to, Who takes an interest in the world of man, Who is Father of the widow and the orphan. They did not know that He is Creator of the world.

There is, consequently, more authentic information about God in the first two chapters of Genesis than in all the other words of antiquity put together. There is a more elevated concept of God found in these chapters than was ever attained by any other people under the sun. And if our Christian conception of God has been deepened, it is a conception that rests squarely on that of Genesis 1-2.

## Visible Creation

The first two chapters of Genesis concern the creation by God of the visible world. "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." It is the visible world with which the author is concerned – everything that his readers can see, all this is the work of the hands of the Almighty. God Himself was not created; He already exists when creation begins. He creates simply by the expression of His will. For having once enunciated the general fact, the author proceeds to give a "breakdown" of the various parts of creation, and in each case the manner of creation is the same: "God said, 'Let there be...' And it was so."

Today we have, through the discovery of other ancient literatures, a better notion of what the author of Genesis was trying to achieve in his account. While the other ancient peoples with whom the Hebrews came in contact did not possess the knowledge of God's creation that the chosen people did, there were naturally various attempts to explain the existence of the world – various "creation" stories. Apparently only modern man who has learned so much about the makeup of the universe, has no interest in where the universe came from.

## Various Gods

The Babylonians, a people among whom the Hebrews spent years of exile after the conquest of Juda in the early sixth century B.C., had a "creation"

story which they, in turn, had borrowed from another people centuries before. It described the production of the material world through the painful exertions of several gods, not creation from nothing, but rather a formation from previously existing material. In this story the stars played an important part, as the residence of certain of the deities. In certain superficial ways, the story resembles Genesis.

The author of Genesis could not have contrasted the true God of the Hebrews more forcibly with the gods of the Gentiles than he did through his account. In contrast to the many gods of the Babylonian story is the one supreme God of Israel. In contrast to the laborious production of the world in the Babylonian story God simply wills and it is. The stars in Genesis are demoted to the status of “signs for seasons and for days and years.” In the Babylonian story man had been made as a kind of after-thought, to serve the gods’ convenience. In Genesis man is created last of all, in the point of the greatest importance, and made in the image and likeness of God.

These are the basic truths which the author of Genesis intended to set before his readers. There is one God. He is supreme over the universe. He made it, all of it. He made man in His own image. In fact the world was made for man in a certain sense. Man is the ruler of the visible world – it is supposed to serve his needs. God has a very definite interest in man and in his destiny, an interest that is expressed not merely in the act of creation but that would be continually exercised throughout history.

The Biblical author thus told his countrymen all that differentiated their religion and their God and that placed them head and shoulders above their neighbors. But what he wrote was transcendent of time – it is as true today, and as applicable to our own belief, as it was to the time and belief of the ancient Hebrews.

But it must be recognized that these truths are set forth by a man of the prescientific age, writing for his contemporaries. His writing inevitably reflects the limitations of his time. He writes in a language that could be understood – had it not been so, Genesis would have failed to achieve its object.

He thought of the earth as a flat surface, covered over by what he called a firmament, and what we call “the sky.” For him this firmament was a solid half-bowl, whose edges touched the corners of the earth. We still use his concept when we speak of the sky as “the celestial sphere.” This firmament he thought had been raised up by God when the “separation of the waters” had taken place in the beginning of time. In the beginning, there was simply a

primordial mass of water covering the earth. First God separated the waters by the firmament (Genesis 1:7), then He brought the dry land out from the expanse of water beneath the firmament (1:9). This resulted in there being waters above the earth, and waters below. The waters below the earth fed the seas and the rivers of the dry land (1:10), while the waters above the earth, that is, above the solid firmament of the sky, were the source of rain (8:2). Rain was caused by the opening of “windows” in this firmament, which allowed the water to pour through.

The firmament also served another purpose. On it were fixed the sun, the moon and the stars, which thus moved about to provide light and to measure time (1:14 ff.).

Now all this is a very primitive conception of the cosmogony, that is, of the makeup of the world. It is utterly unreal, unscientific. But as we can see it is based entirely on simple superficial observation. The earth does *look* flat, it does *appear* to meet the sky at the horizon. The sky does *seem* to be an inverted bowl overhead. Against all these appearances, only a later more inquiring age, gifted with a genuine interest in discovering the composition of things and a few instruments to help it, could give an alternative explanation. The explanation of the rain, the seas, the position of the stars, all fits into the same picture. It is all based on external appearances.

To the extent that the author thought of the world in this way, he was of course in error, as we know today. He was, however, telling the truth as he saw it. These conceptions are entirely incidental to his story, and he is no more to be accused of a misstatement than are we when we speak of “the celestial spheres” or “a sunset.” Most of us who have no special scientific training are guilty in our everyday speech of just such unscientific language as he uses. But we are not to be accused of falsehood any more than he, for we do not intend to explain to others how exactly the order of nature is put together.

## What Genesis Teaches

And that is the important point to bear in mind. The author of Genesis does not teach any of these scientific errors – and consequently the Bible does not teach them – for the makeup of the universe was the thing in which he had the least interest in his writing. He was bound by the limitation of his own knowledge of these matters, to be sure, but he wrote of these things at all only to tell us that God had created them. We can be fairly sure, knowing as we do the character of the Old Testament Jews, that he would probably not have

bothered to write any differently even if he had been told that his notion of nature was erroneous. He was interested in religious truths, not natural history.

Hence we should acknowledge that there is no conflict between Genesis and science in these matters, because they are concerned with wholly different fields. Genesis teaches what science can neither prove nor disprove – that God is one, that He is the creator of all things, that He made the world for our use, and the like. What Genesis does not teach, what it has no interest in whatever, is the province of science – the origin of rain, for example, or the sphericity of the earth.

In part, at least, the author of Genesis knew that his account was not precisely the way things had occurred. In part, he used symbolic and figurative language, and consciously so. He could not do otherwise. Nobody saw the act of creation, nor could anyone describe it in human language if he had. If the author had had a special revelation to enable him to explain things scientifically, as they precisely occurred, his contemporaries surely would not have understood him, nor would we.

## God Simplified

Thus, for example, he arbitrarily divided the story of creation into six days' work. Why did he do this? For several reasons. First of all, he wished to insist on the holiness of the seventh day of rest then observed by the Jews as the Sabbath. So he pictured God as resting on the seventh day, to give an example to his people. He knew that God did not really rest, just as he knew that God did not talk and take counsel with Himself, that He did not walk in a garden in the cool of the day (3:8), and so forth. But this was a homely, earthy way of speaking of God which would appeal to a simple people. We use the same principle when we speak of "God's anger" or "wounding God" through sin. We call it "anthropomorphism," i.e. "manlikeism." Speaking of God in human terms sometimes makes Him easier for us to understand.

Again, take a close look at the six-day arrangement of Genesis 1. It is divided into two parts of three days each, and while one "work" of God is assigned to the first and second, and the fourth and fifth days, the third of each section, i.e., days three and six, each have two "works." Further, the "works" of the second section correspond to those of the first. The fourth day corresponds to the first: in the first is the "work" of the separation of light and darkness, while in the fourth is the creation of the celestial bodies which regulate light and darkness.

The fifth day corresponds to the second: in the second is the separation of the waters, and in the fifth is the creation of the denizens of the waters and of the air that separates them. The sixth day corresponds to the third: in the third the earth is created, and then plantlife; in the sixth, the denizens of the earth are created, and then man who is to feed upon the plantlife of the earth (1:29).

This is obviously an artistic and an artificial arrangement. Its chief function, aside from its poetic symmetry, was undoubtedly to serve as a memory device. The creation story in Genesis had a long history of oral transmission before it was ever put down in writing. And during this time it depended on the memory of man for its preservation. Even after it was written, it existed in a world that knew few books, all of which had to be laboriously copied by hand. It was, consequently, the practice of ancient writers to supply their compositions with memory outlines so that the content that they had written would be accessible to a greater number of people who might never actually read their book.

Another possible reason for the six-day scheme of Genesis 1:1-2:3 is that the Babylonian creation epic previously mentioned consisted of six tablets or divisions. The Biblical author who opposed his story to the polytheistic myth of the Gentiles may have had this scheme in mind in substituting the far more elevated, true account of Genesis.

From this it is apparent that we should beware of the tendency of some commentators of the past, who thought that the six days of creation in Genesis could or should be harmonized with our new-found scientific knowledge concerning the geological ages of the world. In the first place, such a harmonization simply cannot be made. The scientific “ages” do not correspond with the Genesis account at all, as can be verified from any elementary textbook in natural history.

Neither is the Biblical author speaking of any such thing. He speaks clearly of “evening and morning, one day” (1:5, 8, 13, 19, 23, 31). Furthermore, there is no possible way that he should know of any such thing as geological ages, short of a special revelation from God – and that is not the way the book of Genesis was written.

## No Six-Day Task

His six-day scheme disregards the scientifically known origin of the universe entirely. It is simply an outline, nothing more. Having first presented

God as Creator, he arbitrarily selects the various elements of creation and pictures God as creating them on separate days, without any consideration of a real order of time or precedence. Thus the scientifically known connection between the sun and the light of the sun is passed over. The light is “separated” from darkness on the first day, note, yet the sun is pictured as being created only on the fourth day. In a somewhat similar way, the creation of the beasts of the sea and the birds are mentioned in a single breath, as though they were somehow connected. And so they were, in the minds of the ancients. The birds, denizens of the air, were thought to live in the sea – because they flew out to sea and disappeared at the horizon, where the water was conceived as joining the solid firmament. (Incidentally, as late as the 18th century, the great Linnaeus, one of the fathers of modern science, thought that birds hibernated in the water.)

There is, consequently, no connection between the Genesis view of the universe – a religious view – taking it simply as an object of creation – and the scientific view – which goes into its intimate makeup. The two do not conflict because they do not come together at all, and were never intended to do so.

How little the author of Genesis regarded the account in 1:1-2:3 as anything more than a symbolic account of the actual process through which God created the world can be seen from the second account of creation which begins in 2:4. Here he used another source entirely, a parallel story taken from the same traditional material he had at his disposal. In the original text, the style of the two accounts differs in several ways. Even in translation the difference can be seen in that in the first account God is referred to simply as “God,” while in the second he is consistently called “the Lord God.”

In the second account the whole story of creation is retold in a different way. Here there is question of only “one day” (2:4). There is no primordial chaos of water which is separated, but rather the earth is pictured as entirely without rain and plantlife. Then a mist appears to water the face of the earth (2:6), and without further ado the story tells of the creation of man.

The reason the author of Genesis added this second story of creation is the conclusion which follows, the account of the temptation and fall, an item of revelation which was the all-important aspect of this creation story which is wholly concerned with man. Both these creation accounts contained important religious teachings, and thus both were included. But they conflict in nonessential, symbolic details. The fact that the author left the conflicts as

they were shows us how little account he took of them, and how little was his intention to teach anything one way or the other concerning them.

## Details Unimportant

Thus while in the first account the creation of both men and women had already been described as occurring on the “sixth day,” in the second, after a very “anthropomorphic” description of the creation of the first man, pictured as first being modeled out of clay and then infused with breath from God’s nostrils (2:7) only much later on occurs an equally anthropomorphic description of the creation of woman (2:21ff.).

The teachings which the author intends to transmit in these symbolismes we shall examine in the next article. The position of man in the religious thought of Genesis is so important, this will be considered in a chapter by itself. We mention these facts at the present simply to show that the two creation stories in Genesis 1-2 are considerably different in their outlook, when it is a question of precisely those matters which are of no interest to the author, namely the material makeup of the elements of nature. That he could combine sources which resulted in such a conflict of details – of which he was quite as conscious as we – is one way he had of telling us how little these details meant to him.

We can conclude, therefore, firm in the conviction that the presentation in Genesis of God the Creator, should cause no difficulty for either a believer or a non-believer in the Bible as God’s word. The valid scientific conclusions concerning the process by which the world was gradually educed into its present existence, the many modifications that took place in the workings of nature, the composition of matter and its relation to energy – all these and countless other questions like them, such as the age of the visible world, may be readily accepted by the person who accepts Genesis 1-2. There is no conflict between them. Neither should there be any valid reason, on the basis of any scientifically known fact, for anyone to dismiss the story in Genesis as beneath his notice. For Genesis is speaking of things entirely different.

That God is the origin of all that we see in the world, that He brought all things about by the act of His will – whether in an instant, or through a process of millions of years, is immaterial – cannot be known through natural science. It is God’s revelation, enshrined in His word made known to men that must tell us this. The man who knows, as he thinks, all about the workings of



nature, but who knows not of the working of nature's Author, has really a very superficial notion of the universe.

## No Contradictions

Religion and science thus complement each other. Without one or the other man is somehow incomplete. One does not substitute for the other. Together they give us a knowledge that is complete, each in its own field. How incomplete is this knowledge we have, and how dangerous, without the guidance of religion, we are beginning to suspect today, when man has the greatest control in his history of the forces of nature, without a reasoned knowledge of their purpose. The man who wrote the first chapters of Genesis did not know very much about the workings of these forces, but he expressed wisdom unknown to many of those today who have this knowledge, when he voiced a truth which has never before or after been put so eloquently or so completely.

“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth....”



## IV

### “MALE AND FEMALE HE CREATED THEM”

Saint Augustine once said that of all the wonderful things man sees in the world, none is quite so wonderful as man himself.

This is a statement with which few would disagree. Certainly in agreement would be those for whom the chief glory of this present age is its preoccupation with natural science, for the preoccupation with science has resulted in our time's being extremely man-centered in its interests.

The ever-fascinating story of man within the past century and more has brought us to a stage where we now possess a degree of knowledge that would have appeared fantastic to our not too remote ancestors. While all responsible scientists will admit that there are enormous gaps in this knowledge, some of which may never be filled in, the overall view is in general satisfying and complete.

There is, first of all, a general agreement among scientists concerning the fact of biological evolution, despite the disputes that rage about the precise ways in which this evolution may have taken place. It is accepted that man as we know him is the product of a long process of development that began ages ago in a lower form of animal life. This development – again with wide gaps in the process – can be traced through some of its stages in the case of man. The evolutionary process at work in other forms of life can be seen even more clearly.

Another fact concerning which science is in fair agreement is the great age of mankind. To be sure, this age is small when compared with the age of the world, which is reckoned in the millions of years, but it is enormous when

compared with the recorded history of man, which is but a few thousand years. Estimates on the age of true man – that is, man as we know him today – vary considerably, but some go as far back as a half million years.

Science distinguishes between true man, *homo sapiens* as he is called, and the other “men” who preceded him in the evolutionary scale, some of whose fossil remains we have. These earlier “men” do not fall within the scientific classification of man for various structural reasons, but they were certainly not mere animals, for they show the use of reason in the activities that they evidently carried out.

To a certain extent, through the sciences which are concerned with the study of ancient man, we can trace the evolution of culture or civilization undergone by our primitive ancestors. At the dawn of his existence, as far as the researches of these sciences can tell us, man lived in caves or other natural dwelling places, and gathered his food as best he could from wild plantlife and the beasts he was able to kill. Eventually, through long trial and error, he perfected his weapons and his tools, he began to cultivate the ground and to build houses for himself, and the long trek of material progress was begun whose end is not yet.

Finally, science distinguishes the different kinds of men, who differ, sometimes pronouncedly, by color and other racial characteristics.

## Order of Creation

It is quite evident that this portrayal of man differs rather radically from that of the first chapters of Genesis.

Genesis tells us simply that man was created by God. The descent of the entire human race is traced from one man and one woman, our first parents, who are given proper names, Adam and Eve, which mean in Hebrew, respectively, “Man” and probably, “Living One.”

There is nothing in Genesis about an evolution of man from a lower form of life. In the first account of creation it is true, man and woman are pictured as being created at the end of the process, after the other animals. But in the second account, man is created first (2:7), then plantlife (2:9), then the animals (2:19), and finally woman (2:22). The author in each instance was evidently thinking only in terms of direct creation by God.

## Adam and Eve

The Biblical account knows of no process through which man gradually evolved a culture. Adam and Eve and their immediate descendants are indistinguishable, as men and women, from the men and women whom the Biblical author knew. While he was aware that there had elapsed some considerable time between the beginning of man and the call of Abraham by God, which to him was the first significant fact in historical times, he certainly had no idea that such a time had elapsed as we know today. In chapters 5 and 11 of Genesis, genealogies are given to calculate this age. We shall speak of these later. At the present we need note only that in chapter 5 Genesis calculates about a thousand years from the time of Adam to that of Noah. Noah's sons follow five hundred years later (5:31). Then, in 11:10ff., is traced the descent of Sem, the son of Noah and remote ancestor of the Hebrews ("Semites"), giving a period of nearly 500 years to the birth of Abraham. Thus the author of Genesis thought in terms of about 2000 years from the creation of man to the time of Abraham.

One may be tempted to say that it would be hard to imagine a wider contradiction between two views than those of the author of Genesis and modern science concerning the history of man.

And nobody will be disposed to deny this. But between the teaching of the Bible on man and the findings of science there is no contradiction whatever.

## Man Is Different

First of all, what does Genesis teach concerning man?

1) The first creation account teaches that man was created by God.

2) He was created to rule over the visible world. That is, the rest of the world was created for the service of mankind.

3) He was created "in the image and likeness of God" (1:26ff.). This means that man differs substantially from the other animals, that he stands in a relationship to God that is not shared by other visible creatures. This can only imply the spiritual faculties of intellect and will that are not possessed by the beasts. From this fact results also men's special state of friendship with God which is presupposed in the Biblical account.

4) From the second creation account the special dignity of man is more apparent in that his creation is described in such detail and made so different

from the rest of the creation account. If, like the rest of the animals, man is made of the “dust of the ground” (2:7), he lives with a life that has come only through God’s special intervention. In this account even more than in the first is it evident that the world has been made for men’s use.

5) The special relationship and affinity between man and woman is stressed in this account. Woman is pictured symbolically as made from man’s own flesh and bone – in no better way could the Biblical author have combated the ancient errors of some peoples who were inclined to regard woman as an inferior kind of creation. It is from this fact, of the natural affinity of man and woman, their “one flesh,” that the author sees the basis of the unity and indissolubility of marriage (2:24), as also did Christ centuries later (Matthew 19:5ff.).

6) *Why* man was created, and the special state in which he was constituted over and above the fact of creation, are also told us by Genesis. These religious truths will be examined in the next chapter. For the present, we are concerned simply with man’s natural state and primitive existence as detailed by the Biblical author.

Now in what way are any of the above facts contradicted by any truly scientific conclusion?

First, as regards the fact of creation. Science does not, and can not, contradict the religious teaching that man is the object of God’s creation. We have in the preceding chapter discussed the Biblical doctrine of creation, and with what purpose the author of Genesis labored in his presentation of this idea. If anything, science has supported this teaching, at least negatively. No scientist has ever been able to produce living matter from non-living. That such a thing should come to pass by purely natural causality is, in fact, scientifically unsound. Science in its probings insists on the principle which it calls “adequate causality.” From nothing, you do not get something, for from nothing only nothing can come. Life is that “something” that cannot come from the nothing of nonexistence. For life to exist it is necessary that the Author of nature intervene to cause it.

## Life Is From God

It is true, the author of Genesis undoubtedly thought of the beginning of man as a direct act of God’s creation. He had no notion that this creation might have taken place through a gradual evolutionary process, from lower

forms of animal life. But even if he had, he would not have been disturbed in the least. He would have known, in any case, that the original spark of life from which man eventually sprang did not cause itself. God's creation is not minimized simply by the fact that it may have involved a number of steps instead of only one.

Consequently we can today accept what the author of Genesis wrote and accept at the same time the theory of evolution, provided it is accepted precisely for what it is, a scientific theory. We can accept it if it is truly scientific, that is, based on the observation of the *physical* development of man. It does not explain the special characteristic of man, his intellectual soul, that makes him radically different from all other animals. Nor does any responsible man of science claim that it does. "We are driven to the conclusion," writes one scientist, "that in his large and well-developed brain [man] possesses an organ quite disproportionate to his actual requirements – an organ that seems prepared in advance only to be fully utilized as he progresses in civilization.... The brain of prehistoric and of savage man seems to me to prove the existence of some power distinct from that which has guided the lower animals" (Wallace, cf. *Scientific American*, Dec. 1953).

## Evolution?

There was therefore certainly a special intervention of God required to explain the existence of man. Blind evolution alone would not and could not explain it. But the believer in God's creation can hold, if he wishes, that this creation could have been worked through an evolutionary process.

As stated, and as is apparent, the Biblical author did not believe, and could not have believed in an evolutionism of which he had never heard. But we are not obliged to restrict our scientific horizons to those which he possessed. We can be fairly sure that he did not believe that man had been created literally as he describes it in the second creation account, as something first modeled in clay and then blown upon by God. Neither did he believe that woman was really made from one of man's ribs. He knew that there was a vast difference between the earth and man's body. But the truths that he symbolized in this account he believed in firmly – that man – male and female – is the product of God's special creative act, dependent upon Him for both his body and the soul that animates it. If we can today improve upon his description of how this creation took place, we have not been able to improve upon the religious truths that underlie the description.

## Not Natural History

Once we remind ourselves, as again we must, that the first chapters of Genesis were written to establish religious truths, not to dabble in natural history or prehistory, we are on the road to their proper interpretation. Genesis neither proves nor disproves the theory of evolution. It simply does not consider it at all.

Neither does science prove or disprove the religious doctrines taught by Genesis. These do not pertain to the scope of positive science. What has science to say about the purpose of man's creation? Science does not rule out the descent of all men from an original pair of parents as pre-supposed by Genesis as the basis of the religious teaching contained in the doctrine of the fall of man. This will be considered in the next chapter. The scientific distinctions regarding different classes and kinds of men, *homo sapiens* and his predecessors, the various races, and the like, have nothing to do with this Biblical teaching. The Bible holds that all men, in the one thing that makes them men, their essential human nature, are one. This is not contradicted by science. The scientific distinctions, important to science, have no relevance in religion, and are, in fact, dismissed by the author of Genesis as of no consequence.

## How Old Is Man?

The Biblical author was, as we have noted, ignorant of the age of mankind in the world. As a matter of fact, so are we, though we are undoubtedly closer to the mark than he was. He did know that a considerable time had intervened between man's beginning and the commencement of historical times. In chapters 5 and 11 of Genesis he undertook to indicate this lapse of time by the genealogies which he inserted there drawn from traditional source material.

The "literary form" of these genealogies must be carefully considered, in the manner that we have previously indicated with regard to other literary forms. In other words, we must understand correctly just what the author was trying to teach by employing these traditional sources. Only in this way can we interpret rightly the teaching of Genesis.

First of all, we must note that – for a religious purpose that we shall consider in a later chapter – the author divided the pre-history of man into two unequal periods, the period from Adam to the Flood, and the period from the Flood to Abraham. It was to summarize the time that elapsed during these periods that he used these genealogies.



## Nothing Exact

The genealogies themselves were, of course, incomplete. In our sense of the word they are not even scientific genealogies at all, but vague gestures towards indicating some of the mighty men of the past who were traditionally associated with the age in question. The quite artificial character of these genealogies can be seen in the fact that both of them, the one in chapter 5 and the other in 11:10ff., consist of exactly ten generations each, counting from first to last.

To indicate the passage of time which was known to be much longer than the few generations in question, the ages of the individuals whose names were included were simply magnified. This was a recognized literary device of the time, not intended to be taken literally. We have other examples in the dynastic lists kept by the Babylonians, where the ages involved proceed into astronomical figures, reckoned in the thousands instead of the comparatively modest hundreds of Genesis.

This conventional practice accounts for the extremely unreal ages associated with the men in the name lists of Genesis 5 and 11:10ff. The author of Genesis was not intending to tell us, for example, that Methuselah really lived to be nine hundred and sixty-nine years old. He no more knew how old Methuselah lived to be than do we. He simply used Methuselah's name to help him bridge over the gap between the time of creation and the time of Noah, and to tell us that a great time elapsed therein. His contemporaries would have understood this. Later on, people forgot that men once wrote in this way – which is surely not the way we write – but nowadays we are discovering the fact once more, and thus learning anew how Genesis should be interpreted.

## Bible Not Scientific

The author had another purpose to serve in the numbers that he selected to use in this fashion, which coincided with his religious purpose in writing. This purpose we shall note in our next article.

What we have shown here is that there is no conflict between Genesis, which artificially calculates the age of man from creation to Abraham as roughly 2000 years, and the scientific knowledge that tells us of the lapse of many more thousands of years. They are not speaking the same language, and not talking about the same thing. Science is interested in discovering factually how long man has been on the earth, and its estimates are directed towards

this end. The author of Genesis merely wanted to say that a certain amount of time intervened, and he chose a recognized conventional device to indicate this. How long man had really been on the earth he neither knew nor, in all likelihood, did he care a great deal

The best way to see how utterly uninterested Genesis is in scientific genealogy, or in science at all, can be seen from the use made of a somewhat similar genealogy in chapter 10, this time of the sons of Noah.

Having divided the prehistorical period into the two periods divided by the Flood, the author is anxious to underline the fact that even after the Flood, when the world underwent, as it were, a second creation, all mankind was still one. He did this, not unnaturally, by means of a genealogy, deriving the peoples of the then known world from one or another of the three sons of Noah.

On the face of it, the genealogy is wholly artificial. Most of the "names" in it are those of cities or countries, rather than of men. It is wholly unscientific in that the actual bases of distinction between various peoples are totally disregarded, and the distinctions are made along geographical, partly political, and above all, religious lines.

Thus the more remote Gentile peoples whom the Hebrews knew very little, if at all, are derived from Noah's son Japheth. Among these are "Medai" (the Medes) and "Javan" (Greece), and later, "Tarshish" (Tartessus in Spain) and "Kittim" (Cyprus). There are, it is true, some historical and racial ties between some of these people, but that is not what the author of Genesis had in mind in deriving them from a common ancestor. These were the "good" Gentiles, against whom the Jews had no quarrel. They were thus the descendants of Japheth, who, it had been prophesied (9:27) would share in the good things of the children of Israel.

On the other hand, the traditional enemies of the Jews, their oppressors and persecutors, are classed among the sons of Ham, the son of Noah cursed by his father. Among these are Egypt and Canaan. Actually, by race the Canaanites were not a single people and in any case were for the most part more closely related to the Hebrews than to the Egyptians. But the purpose of Genesis is to teach religion, not genetics. In the same way, therefore, from Sem, the son blessed by his father, are derived the Israelites and their acknowledged relatives.

From what we have said by now, we should have no difficulty in reconciling the picture of mankind's civilization as related in Genesis with the

painful evolution hinted at by science. The Biblical author knew little about the origins of material culture, or the processes by which it had been achieved. He had certain traditions preserved among the source material that he used – for example, the beginning of hunting is ascribed in 10:8ff. to a certain Nimrod (whose name has also been preserved by other peoples of the Middle East), and the making of musical instruments was attributed to a descendant of Cain named Jubal (4:21). To some extent these traditions may represent factual associations – they are handed on by the author of Genesis without comment – and to some extent they may be simply a play on words (as the Hebrew *jobel* means “trumpet”). Though there is, in this limited way, some small interest taken in these matters, it is plain that for the most part Genesis is not concerned with the question.

## Purpose of Scriptures

The Bible is not designed to trace man's cultural development, but to tell us of his origin from God, his purpose in the world, and other religious truths concerning him. Hence the Bible does not tell us, one way or the other, about his development of language and the arts, crafts, and sciences. The picture in the second account of creation, 2:19ff. of the animals passing in procession before men to receive their names is a symbol of what is stated by God in the first account, 1:29ff. regarding man's dominance over the earth. In ancient times “naming” was a sign of ownership.

The scientific study of man's origins, therefore, and the religious study found in Genesis are separate and distinct. They rarely overlap. Where they do briefly and superficially coincide, there is no conflict between them, but rather the closest harmony. Where they go their separate ways, each has important things to tell us to make our understanding complete and integral.

## Gift of Knowledge

We can be grateful for the fact that today we stand at the end of a long chain of human knowledge – itself God's gift – that has, bit by bit, pieced together the evidence from the past to put together an understanding of man which would have been beyond the wildest dreams of our earlier ancestor who wrote the first chapters of Genesis. Our later descendants, building on the same foundations, will, we may well believe, possess a knowledge that will pale our own into insignificance. But all of us together will continue to stand before the book of Genesis in the sober realization that what has been written

there has been written for all time. It is what our scientific investigations could never have made known to us. It is what our scientific investigations will never remove, and never replace.

## V

### “THE LORD GOD...PUT MAN IN THE GARDEN”

Gilbert K. Chesterton described his conversion to Catholicism as the end of a series of quests. One of the quests he had pursued was the solution to the problem of man – the single creature who is capable of such good and such evil. It is a problem, incidentally, that runs like a thread through the literature of classical antiquity – and it is a problem whose solution was never quite grasped.

The problem of man, his goodness and his evil, the reconciliation of the two and their explanation – such is the problem to which Chesterton found the answer in the Christian doctrine of original sin. This is the answer for which the ancient Greeks sought in vain. It is an answer to be found only in God’s revelation. It is an answer found at least partially in the third chapter of Genesis.

It is this teaching that explains the fact that the author of Genesis has included the second account of creation in his narrative, for it is the climax of this second account.

Now there is no possible conflict between this story and the discoveries about man which we know through the findings of positive science. This story deals with matters with which science has no concern whatever, about which it can say nothing pro or contra.

Because of the extreme importance which this story has in the development of the first chapters of Genesis, however, it is vital that we should understand its teachings correctly. And to understand it, it is again essential that we keep in mind the religious purpose of Genesis and keep distinct the meaning of the author from the literary forms which he used – forms which

are not usual with us, and which, unless we are on our guard, can lead us astray down paths which the author never intended that we should follow.

After briefly describing the creation of the world and of man in 2:4-7, the author proceeds to tell us that “the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and there he put the man whom he had formed.”

The rather curious geography that follows in the text describing the location of Eden suggests to us that the author was not too much concerned with the garden as a garden, but rather with what the garden symbolized to him and to his readers. It likewise suggests that some of the commentators of the past were probably off on a fruitless journey when they attempted to localize the garden for the better understanding of the sacred text.

In 2:10-14 four rivers are described as working their way out of Eden, one of which, the last, is certainly identifiable, the River Euphrates of Mesopotamia, still known by that name today. This is truly a river “in the east.” So is the third river mentioned by the author, called by him in Hebrew *Hiddekel*, an ancient name for the Tigris, the other great river of Mesopotamia. But the other two rivers, unknown in themselves, are located by the author not in Mesopotamia, but at extraordinary distances away. One is in the land of Havilah, which was most probably Arabia, and the other “around the whole land of Cush.” Cush was the country to the south of Egypt, therefore west and south, not east. Needless to say, these rivers could not flow from a single source.

While it is true that the primitive notions of geographical exactness are not always satisfactory to our tastes, it seems to be more than likely that the author is not intending to localize Eden at all, but rather to speak of it symbolically. Eden itself is not a Hebrew word. It is a name older than the Bible, a sort of word that may have signified to the author what “Utopia” or “Erewhon” would mean to a later writer. “The east” was to the ancients, as to us, the remote land, the land of mystery. And abundant waters – particularly such waters as that of the Euphrates, which was “*the* great river” to the Israelites – were symbolic of great blessing and happiness to the people of water-shy Palestine. When the prophets of Israel predicted the coming of the great Messiah and King, one of the symbols they used to express the blessing that would attend his coming was that of abundant water.

## Garden of Eden

Whether or not the author of Genesis intended to localize the scene of the story he is about to tell – and the point is of minor importance – it is certain that Eden's symbolic significance is much more important. It is significant not as a particular place on the earth, but as the condition in which man was placed by God over and above His creation.

For what is noteworthy in this description is that “the Lord God *took* the man and *put* him in the garden of Eden” (2:15). What Adam is to experience as an inhabitant of the garden is, in other words, something that is to be his lot quite independent of his created natural state.

And what is the life of the garden? First, it contained “every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil” (2:8). God's command to man in placing him in this garden was, “You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you shall eat of it you shall die” (2:16ff.).

The symbolism “eating of the fruit of a tree,” to mean “participating in something,” was widespread in ancient literature. The “tree of life” figures in Babylonian and Assyrian mythology with the same meaning that it has here. The Biblical author uses it as a poetic image, much as we might speak of “the fountain of youth,” to mean that in the state in which God placed man after his creation, he had the gift of immortality.

## Free Will

Man had other gifts as well in this supernatural state. As we learn later, “the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed” (2:25). There was no condition of concupiscence, no disorganization by which man's higher faculties of intellect and will could be swept along and overpowered by his lower bodily appetites. Man was in perfect control of himself.

Above all, the picture that the author draws throughout chapters 2 and 3 is to show a perfect state of intimacy and friendship between God and man. After man has forfeited this friendship and has lost his right to the special state to which God had raised him, significantly enough man hides himself from God's presence (3:8).

## Symbolic

This elevated state of man, therefore, which the author has described under the imagery of the garden and its trees, was to be preserved or lost in a manner which he describes in equally symbolic terms: “In the day that you eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall die.”

This means, simply, “In the day that you sin, you shall die.” The “knowledge” that is spoken of is not an intellectual knowledge, but the knowledge of experience. This is the customary way in which the Hebrews used the word – as when they referred to a man’s “knowing” his wife (as in 4:1), they meant sexual experience. The *experience* of “good and evil,” therefore, was the condition upon which depended man’s continued state in the special prerogatives that he had received.

“Good and evil” does not mean good *or* evil, but good-and-evil as a single unity. The Hebrews used such an expression to refer to the moral judgment by which good and evil were determined, just as they spoke of binding-and-loosing to refer to the sentence by which judicial decisions were imposed, or entering-and-leaving, going-and-coming, and the like, to refer to a man’s movements in general. It is the context in every case that determines what precisely is involved, good *or* evil, binding *or* loosing, entering *or* leaving, going *or* coming. Here it is obviously a question of *the experience of evil*.

Man was, consequently, forbidden the experience of moral evil, what we call more simply, “sin.” Philosophers will tell us this prohibition imposed by God as the condition of man’s permanence in his elevated state was not simply negative. To avoid sin, one must practice good.

## The “Serpent”

That man failed the test is the well-known sequel of the story in chapter 3. The author tells us that temptation was presented to our first parents by one whom he calls “the serpent.” Jewish and Christian tradition has always interpreted this as a symbol of Satan, and rightly so, as the story in Genesis itself makes clear. The “serpent” throughout is treated as an intellectual being with craft and cunning. The reason the author chose a serpent as his symbol may very well have been the fact that the Gentiles of Canaan and the Middle East in general were given at this time to the worship of various serpent-gods. This was one way Genesis had of showing its contempt of this practice.



Actually the author of Genesis has written a much subtler commentary on the wiles of Satan than he is generally given credit for. In other words, he certainly had a keen awareness of the superhuman intellectual character of Satan, the traditional enemy of mankind. His idea of the psychological nature of temptation is quite exact.

Thus Satan is pictured as first distorting the divine condition of permanence in the garden: "Did God say, 'You shall not eat of any tree of the garden?'" (3:1). This is his insinuation to the woman who is able to resist by correctly restating the divine command in 3:2ff. "We *may* eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden; but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.'" Against his further onslaught, however, she is no match, as he lyingly tells her what will be the consequences of disobedience of the divine command (3:4ff.). "You will *not* die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." The temptation is attractive, she succumbs, and with her, her husband.

## Man's First Sin

What was the sin committed by our first parents, hidden behind the imagery of this story? We do not know, nor, in all likelihood, did the author of the story. Of one thing we can be sure, this sin did not consist in their use of their sex faculties. This interpretation, still made by some, shows a curious notion of the meaning of sex and marriage. The author of Genesis had already included in his first creation account God's blessing on the human race, with the injunction that it was to be fruitful and multiply (1:28), and the second account, of which this present story is part, has spoken of marriage as of divine institution, rooted in the very nature of man and woman (2:24).

Whatever the nature of this original sin, it was disastrous in its results. First of all, the state of happy intimacy between God and man was destroyed (3:8ff.). Again, the story shows a perceptive appreciation of the meaning of the state of sin, by describing man's reaction in this manner. Inevitably, too, man's primitive innocence was now a thing of the past, and his lower nature was no longer under perfect control, as we all know to our sorrow (3:7, 10).

The further consequences of this state are made clear in the judgment of God, expressed in 3:14ff. Pain and suffering from a now disordered nature (3:16), a life in which the struggle for existence will substitute for the ideal

harmony originally planned (3:17ff.), and death (3:19) follow in the wake of sin, as its consequences and as perpetual reminders of its presence in the world.

The concluding verses of the story are only a summing up of this new state of man, the state in which man lived when the author of Genesis wrote. He presents God as saying, ironically, "Behold, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil!" Was not this what Satan had falsely promised? It had not, of course, come to pass. Hence, God continues, in the same ironic vein: "Lest he put forth his hand and take also of the tree of life, and eat and live forever...." The consequence of man's disobedience, by which he had thought to be like God, is his exclusion from the state of blessedness to which God had raised him. To emphasize the finality of this exclusion, the author concludes, "He drove out the man and at the east of (or, "before") the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to guard the way to the tree of life."

The "cherubim," incidentally, in this story are not the little winged cupids that fill the canvases of the Renaissance painters. Neither are they angels, as the word came to be used later. The writer was thinking of the winged bulls and lions with which he was familiar from Assyrian and Babylonian monuments, and which we find in profusion in our museums today. These were called "cherubim." They were quite mythical creatures, of course, and this should be another indication to us how we are not to be misled by the letter of this story to overlook the religious and historically factual truth that it symbolizes.

## Only One God

Before we leave the story, it might be well to note another expression used by the author, which sometimes causes difficulty. To whom does God refer when He says that Adam "has become like one of *us*"? As we should remember, the author pictured God as speaking in the same way in the first creation account, when he said (1:26), "Let *us* make man in *our* image." Certainly, there is no possible doubt that the author knows that God is one. Neither is this language an indication that the sources which he used were originally polytheistic, though, as we have noted, there were somewhat similar stories found among pagan peoples. Many commentators think this language is simply rhetorical, like our "editorial we" or the manner in which a single person can say, "let us see." It is more likely, however, that the author considers God in these instances to be taking counsel with the angelic court. This same idea, purely a figure of speech, occurs in Job 1:6 and elsewhere in the Bible.

Thus, in the guise of a traditional creation story which had borrowed many of the expressions and figures of contemporary literature, the author of Genesis expressed to his readers the revealed knowledge treasured in the religion of Israel that explained the mystery of man. Man, created to the image and likeness of God, created by God to a destiny over and above his natural deserts, man capable of the greatest good and the most exalted yearnings, is at the same time a sinful creature, living in a world which bespeaks his opposition to God. This evil and good that is man is the mystery, whose key is the doctrine of original sin. It was this doctrine, as we have explained before, which solved the problem which Chesterton had formed from his observation and reflection on man.

## Mystery of Man

If Genesis had done nothing more than this it would have preserved a greater wisdom than is to be found in any of the other literature of antiquity. While there are faint allusions to this great truth to be found in the literatures of other peoples – enough to show that the revelation which was preserved pure by the Israelites had once been a heritage of others as well – there is no such clearly defined teaching to be found anywhere but in Genesis. The Greeks, for one, had a tradition of a “golden age” when things had not been as they now were on the earth. But the great spiritual truth that underlay this glimmer of ancient knowledge was entirely unknown to them. Genesis alone was the recipient of the integral revelation.

But Genesis did more. The revelation was not merely to explain, it was to give hope. It was not only to tell how man had come to be in his sinful state but to point to an eventual Redemption.

This Redemption is to be found prophesied in 3:14ff., the words of God to the serpent. First, there is a condemnation, expressed in terms applicable to the symbol chosen by the author. In this he undoubtedly intended a play on words. “Dust you shall eat all the days of your life,” literally a reference to the slithering motion of the serpent, was likewise a Hebrew idiom. “To eat dust” meant “to stand condemned,” “to be destroyed,” much like our familiar idiom borrowed from the American Indians, “to bite the dust.”

More important than this simple condemnation of Satan, however, are the consequences that it will have for man. God says,

“I will put enmity between you and the woman,

and between your seed and her seed;  
He shall bruise your head,  
and you shall bruise his heel.”

This enmity is not a natural repugnance, not something which is natural at all, but a moral opposition put there by God – it means an enmity that exists by God’s decree, depending from his condemnation of the serpent. It means, in other words, that man, who succumbed to the power of Satan through his sin, has from God’s words assurance that his slavery will not be forever. It is assurance that the power of Satan will be resisted. It will be resisted continually – as it exists between Satan’s “seed,” the order of evil, and Eve’s “seed,” the human race.

And it will be a resistance that will be successful. “He” – the seed of the woman – will eventually triumph over Satan – “he shall bruise your head.” In so doing, he will suffer in the process, for Satan “shall bruise his heel.” Nevertheless, the triumph will be complete. The picture which the author draws is of a victorious man crushing the head of a serpent into the soil though the serpent’s fangs are fixed in his heel.

How much the Biblical author realized was contained in this prophecy, we do not know. Probably he had only the knowledge that somehow, by what manner he did not know, the human race would achieve this triumph. Probably he thought of the “he” in question (which in Hebrew can also mean “it,” that is, the “seed”) as the human race in general.

By the second century before Christ, however, we know that some Jews at least interpreted this passage to refer to a single person. When the ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures was made at this time, the passage was so interpreted in the text. By this time the latest prophecies of the great teachers of Israel had clarified the prediction to this extent. And Christian teaching has rightly seen its final completion in the salvation brought through Jesus Christ.

## Prophecy

This prophecy in Genesis is all important, consequently, as the basis on which the later theology of Israel and of the Catholic Church has been built, concerning the Redemption brought to sinful man through the incredible goodness of a loving God.

In Romans 5:12ff. we have the prophetic completion and fulfillment of the story found in Genesis 3. Here Saint Paul develops, in the fullness of time, the religious thinking of Israel, strengthened by later revelation, in which the whole significance of Adam's fall is seen in relation to the salvation of Christ. If, however, we see the fullness of this teaching in the New Testament, it is only because it presupposes the Old Testament account. Each without the other would be incomprehensible.

In the above explanations we have expressed no religious belief that is not accepted by all orthodox Christians. The interpretation of the passage in Genesis has not been made for them so much as it has been for those who do not accept Christian teaching.

There is the danger, when dealing with a primitive literature such as that of Genesis, for the modern reader to be sidetracked by the form of the text, which may cause him to overlook its vital significance. If some of the imagery employed by the author is strange to us, if his way of speaking of God is to us at times childish, if in speaking of the same religious truths we would employ a greatly different style of writing – we must not let such trivial considerations blind us to the content of what he wrote. That content, bear in mind, is a wisdom towards which some of the most cultivated and civilized men of antiquity – and of more recent times – have yearned and labored in vain. It is as foolish to reject truths simply because of their unusual expression as it is foolish to reject a man because of the strange color of his skin or the strange shape of his nose.

This is not the place for an apologetics for the truths of the Judeo-Christian revelation. Here we need only warn that it would be the height of foolishness to despise an author who knew more about man and his destiny than all the psychologists and politicians who know not what he knew.



## VI

### THE FLOOD AND THE ARK

Not long ago a sensation-hunting newsman misquoted a Biblical archaeologist with the wholly unjustified announcement that the remains of Noah's Ark had been discovered on Mount Ararat in Armenia. (The announcement was made on page one; the archaeologist's disclaimer, the next day, appeared on a back page.)

This was not the first instance of this kind, nor the first instance with regard to the Ark, for that matter. The genuine discoveries of archaeology which have so magnificently come to the support of the Biblical narrative are, in actuality, no less startling than the discovery of Noah's Ark, though they are not quite as obvious as this to the superficial observer. Nevertheless, to the present date, no such tangible evidence has been discovered of the story told in Genesis 6-9.

Nor will it ever be discovered, in all probability. The odds are all against it. The labors of the few who attempt to find it are probably doomed to the same frustration as the suspicion of the Soviet government (whose territory was overlooked by Ararat) that such investigations are really spying expeditions of the western powers. Biblical archaeology does not consist in finding Arks, but in interpreting potsherds, stones, walls, meager inscriptions, and in piecing together laboriously the story of the past.

Nevertheless, those who go forth to try to find the Ark are less deluded than those who think there is no possibility of their ever discovering it, simply because it never existed. For we have every reason to accept the Biblical narrative in Genesis 6-9 as referring to a genuinely historical fact.

The first thing we should try to do is determine the purpose that this story of Noah's Ark serves in the narrative of the first chapter of Genesis. In doing this, we can say what we know concerning the historical basis of the narrative itself, which is really of secondary interest to the author and to us.

Having laid the theological basis for his religion in the picture of one God Who is the Creator of the visible world, and in particular of man, for whose use He made the world, the author of Genesis concluded his second account of creation with the history of man's primitive elevation to a state above his nature, his sin, and thus his fall from grace. Together with the sin of man were bound up the consequences of this sin – the loss of the gifts of immortality, of immunity from concupiscence, and the like.

In chapter 4 the author has joined to this account a history of Cain and Abel, and another story of Cain's descendants, which complements the story of man's fall and teaches some further lessons.

The author has not told us previously that Adam's fall involved a loss to the entire human race, though he had hinted at it, insofar as Adam and Eve were at the time the entire human race. In chapter 4 he makes explicit that the fall of our original parents included their descendants as well.

## Sin Continues

For the sin that was let loose in the world through Adam and Eve, we speedily see, is a continuing thing in their descendants. In the story of Cain and Abel – originally a comparison, as is apparent, of the relative states of shepherd and farmer, with the preference given to the farmer – the first murder in the Bible is described. And in the genealogy of Cain, in 4:17ff., we see that the sin of man increases. Lamech, the descendant of Cain, exacts a vengeance of seventy-seven fold for a simple insult, whereas the vengeance of Cain, decreed by the Lord, had been but sevenfold, and that for murder (4:15). The sinfulness of man, and its supreme sign, death, thus by the end of chapter 4 is shown to have increased in enormous proportions. This is the way the author of Genesis chose to tell us that the sin of Adam and Eve was an inherited sin, a sin in which the entire human race participated.

Some of the details in chapter 4 or rather in the sources used by the author to make up this chapter, we shall consider in our next and final article. They were not important to the author in the development of his religious teaching, but they have an interest in themselves.



## Also Virtue

At the very end of the chapter, the author somewhat lightens the picture of evil that he has drawn. Though sin continued and increased in man, he tells us, yet there was also good in the world. For among others of Adam's descendants were those in whose "time men began to call upon the name of the Lord" (4:26).

After this, there follows chapter 5, the genealogy to bridge the gap between Adam and the Flood. As we stated previously, this genealogy has a purpose other than simply to fill in the space that the author knew had intervened. The extraordinary ages that he assigned to the names in this genealogy also had a symbolic purpose in his religious teaching. They are part of a numerical scheme that extends throughout the rest of the book of Genesis.

Unfortunately, the original numbers as written by the author have been in some cases disturbed – that is, the text as we have it is somewhat corrupted. This is not surprising, in view of the fact that the Hebrew numerical system is a complicated one, with ample opportunity afforded for numbers to be incorrectly copied. We know that some of the numbers are incorrect in the present text, particularly in view of the fact that the ancient translations from the Hebrew, which were translated from a Hebrew text in a better state of preservation than our own, give numbers different in part from the ones that we possess.

## Worthy of Life

What the author originally intended was to decrease the ages with each succeeding generation. The purpose of this was to spell out graphically what he had already taught by implication in telling us that Adam was excluded from the tree of life, that is, the gift of immortality. Long life was a sign of blessedness. A short life was a curse. If, therefore, he would show men of each succeeding generation living shorter and shorter lives, the teaching – apparent to his readers – would be that, on the one hand the gift originally given to Adam was most definitely not the possession of his descendants, and, on the other hand, that men were increasingly sinful and therefore less worthy of a long life.

With the possible exception of Enoch, therefore, this scheme was most probably originally carried out. Enoch was an exception to the rules. He was "taken" by God, that is, removed from the world, because he "walked with

God.” Hence his age is a highly symbolic one, his years equaling the number of days of a year, an ideal and perfect number (5:23ff.).

The same system was carried out in chapter 11:10ff., except now the symbolic numbers were much smaller, as befitted man after the “second creation” symbolized by the Flood and its sequel. The same system goes into historical times and is represented in the ages assigned Abraham and his immediate descendants. The system is a somewhat complicated one, which it is not necessary for us to describe here. It is simply necessary to note the original intent that the author had in framing the genealogy of chapter 5 (and of chapter 11:10ff.).

What purpose, then, did the story of the Flood serve in this development?

When the author had explained that the sin of Adam had increased manifold in Adam’s descendants he sought among his available sources for a story which would at the same time dramatize the evil state to which men had come, and also show the mercy of God and his desire to save men. This story he found in the account of the Flood.

This story of the Flood is preserved not only in the Bible, but also in the literatures of numerous other peoples of the ancient East. In the version that is found in Babylonian texts, it is strikingly similar to the account in Genesis, pointing to a common, more ancient source for it and the Biblical account. Whereas the Biblical account is strictly monotheistic, however, the Babylonian story is childish polytheistic and is corrupted with numerous superstitious elements. The Babylonian “Noah” has the engaging name Utnapishtim.

The existence of this story among many peoples, having been handed down by independent traditions, is the best possible argument for the historical character of the essential facts that it relates. No physical evidence has been forthcoming to testify to it, just as we have no physical evidence, for example, that Julius Caesar actually was in Gaul as he said he was, but the literary evidence is quite strong. It was once thought that archaeological excavations had shown physical evidence of this Flood, but that was a mistake.

Historically, there is every reason to believe that throughout Mesopotamia – the home of the Hebrews’ ancestors – in prehistoric times an extraordinary flood took place which must have obliterated a great expanse of territory. There is every reason, even apart from the veracity of the Biblical account, to believe that there was a Noah through whose efforts a new start was possible to be made after the flood was past.

## God's Plan

This ancient story was chosen by the author of Genesis to mark the half way point in his religious development leading up to Abraham. The Flood was, of course, a visitation upon mankind because of its sins. The Hebrew could not conceive of anything occurring that was not within God's plan for the world, and of course we know that he was right, even though things may not always have been quite as simple as he made them appear. The preservation of Noah and his family, likewise, was through God's plan. If Noah and his people were saved, it was evidence of God's mercy, and evidence, too, that there were good men in the world, worthy to be saved.

Of course, this ancient Flood did not cover the entire world. Such a thing is inconceivable and physically impossible. Neither is it necessary to think that it destroyed the entire human race then existing, that is, that it covered the entire inhabited world. On the face of it, this is most unlikely. The author probably believed that it did and at least he wrote up his account from sources which said that it had, but we interpret his text according to the actual use he made of his sources and the purpose he had in writing. This is his teaching, and nothing else is his teaching.

## Symbolic Story

He was not intending to teach us, literally, that the entire human race was destroyed to a man, any more than in Genesis 3:8 he intended to teach us, literally, that God walked in a garden in the cool of the day. We have already noted that the genealogy in Genesis 10, which traces all the peoples of the earth – or at least the peoples that the Hebrew author knew of – from the three sons of Noah, intends to teach the unity of the human race, together with some other doctrinal matters. It is not necessary that this genealogy should be literally historical, and, as we have said, it shows signs of being highly artificial. Neither is it necessary that our interpretation of the Flood story see it as anything more than a parable, a symbolic story, though as we have noted, the basic historical fact behind it is fairly certain.

We must stress again that the author is concerned with teaching religion, not natural history. He has used the story to illustrate religious teachings, and we need not press any conclusions from it other than those which he intended as the point of his narrative.

Quite apart then, from the actual extent of this ancient Flood, whatever it may have been, its symbolic purpose is to teach God's punishment of

mankind's sin and His mercy for the sake of the just, such as Noah was. It is also taken as the turning point in God's dealing with man, and the beginning of a new era in His relations with men.

To the Jews, the supreme act between God and man was signified by the covenant enacted through Moses on Sinai, whereby the people of Israel had been selected to be the instruments of God's salvation for mankind. Looking back into history, the author of Genesis saw the ancient ages as having in some fashion foreshadowed and prepared for this great event.

Thus, in a sense, God's relation to Adam had been a covenant, which Adam had violated and thereby forfeited. After the Flood narrative, the author will describe God's renewal of good relations with men as another covenant. Much later on, he will describe God's election of Abraham in terms of a covenant. The Flood itself, therefore, symbolizes for the author the end of one age and the beginning of another. The sin of Adam and his descendants reaches its climax, and the punishment of the Flood descends. Afterwards, God approaches mankind once more, in the person of Noah, and starts afresh. Men are soon sinning as much as ever before, to be sure, but the story of the whole Old Testament, as far as that goes, is of God's constant effort to draw men to Himself despite themselves.

What the author is doing by means of this story, consequently, is to enunciate some rather profound religious truths, which are transcendent of the time, the place, and the extent of the Flood which the story tells about. They would be equally true even if there were no historical basis to the Flood at all, though we have good reason to believe in it, quite apart from the Biblical story.

How many of the details within the story as told in Genesis we need to take as historically factual, and what is rather told us with no intention of being the author's teaching, would be difficult to say. Certainly as regards some of these details, we can see that they evidently do not pertain to the author's purpose at all. It is the story's "moral" or application, of course, that contains his teaching, not its details.

## **Flood Stories Differ**

How little concern he had with these details, and their historical verification, can again be seen from his own work. As with the teaching on creation, he had used two separate accounts of the same story to tell of the Flood. In this instance, however, rather than tell them one after the other, he has combined them in the telling. It is not too difficult to separate the two

sources. He used the two because each of them contained elements that he needed to build up his complete account. But the details in the two accounts frequently conflict.

Thus one account begins in 6:11ff., in which Noah is told to take with him into the ark “of *every* living thing of *all* flesh, two of *every* sort.” The command of God and prediction of the flood begins all over again in 7:1ff. and this time Noah hears that he is “to take with you *seven* pairs of all clean animals, the male and the female, and a *pair* of the animals that are not clean.” In 7:6 it is said, “Noah was six hundred years old when the flood of waters came upon the earth.” In 7:11 we read that “in the six hundredth year of Noah’s life, in the second month, on the seventeenth day of the month, on that day the fountains of the great deep burst forth, and the windows of heaven were opened.” In one account, e.g. 7:17, “the flood continued forty days upon the earth.” In the other, e.g. 7:24 “the waters prevailed upon the earth a hundred and fifty days.”

And so it goes throughout the entire story. There are numerous manifest contradictions between the sources which the author used. Again, we must say it, he was quite as capable as we are of noticing these contradictions. We must not suppose that he could write two almost consecutive sentences, in which contradictory details are used, and not be aware of the fact. We must give him credit for the same perception which we also possess. Obviously the same flood could not have lasted forty days and one hundred and fifty, and he knew it. He could not have intended to teach us both these statements. The fact that he so blithely combined the two in his account should be sufficient indication that he did not think the matter worth worrying about. He did not decide which was correct, if either. He was interested in using, for purposes of his own, the two stories, which he copied down as he found them.

Thus while many of the details in the author’s story are manifestly unhistorical, and while the original sense of the accounts relative to a total destruction of mankind need not be taken as literally historical, as it is actually used in Genesis the combined account serves to illustrate truths dear to the author’s heart and of tremendous value to ourselves.

In 6:5ff., and 6:11ff., the author tells us that the Flood was God’s visitation upon sinful mankind. In 6:8, 9, 14ff., 7:1ff., we see that God, despite His justice which impels Him to punish sin, is disposed to be merciful towards the just. The good are not to be punished along with the evil. The same lesson is forcibly taught by the story of Abraham and Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 18:22ff., and Genesis 19.

## God's Blessing

After the account of the Flood itself, in 8:20ff., another truth is taught in the words quoted of the Lord: "I will never again curse the ground because of man, for the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth; neither will I ever again destroy every living creature as I have done." We must not look, says the author, to see God visit upon man the full consequences of his crimes. If He did so, the world would be forever blotted out. God is merciful, God is long suffering, God takes man's weakness into account. This is the history of the relation of God to man.

These lessons are repeated in chapter 9, where the author poetically represents the new beginning made between God and Noah. Once again the earth is blessed and called upon to be fruitful and multiply. Once again man is called upon to walk in righteous ways and avoid sin. Once again God draws near to man in a covenant.

Thus we rightly consider this episode as a halfway mark in the author's pre-history. The end is not yet. After the genealogy of chapter 10, whose purpose we have already noted, there follows in chapter 11 the story of the tower of Babel, which shows that man has learned nothing through the experience of chastisement of the past. He is still sinful, proud, in opposition to God.

But having concluded with the genealogy of 11:10ff., identifying the various peoples of the world, the author has been brought to Abraham, with whom begins the story of his people. From here on, the story will concern not mankind in general, but the Hebrew people whom God chose to Himself that through them might come mercy to all the world.

The story of the Flood, which to other peoples had been an interesting phenomenon to record, and to romanticize upon, under the hand of the Biblical author has taken on a dignity which it could otherwise never have possessed. Through his inspired pen it has been welded into a teaching about God, more profound than any known otherwise to his age, and never subsequently surpassed. For the truths that he illustrated by its use, we know as truths today. God deals with us as God dealt with Noah.

## VII

### CAIN'S WIFE... THE TOWER OF BABEL

It was once the practice of “village atheists” of the type of Colonel Robert Ingersoll, that terror of fundamentalists, when not asking such ungrammatical and theologically childish questions as “Why doesn’t God kill the devil?” or daring the Almighty to strike him down in a specified time, to use the Bible as a source-book of absurdities and contradictions. One of the favorites had to do with the lady who was Cain’s wife. “Who did Cain marry, if there were only four people in the world, himself and his brother Abel, newly murdered, and his two parents?”

Ordinarily the questioner overlooked considerable other “absurdities” in the same context, which mean just as much, and just as little, as the one he found. Who was supposed to kill Cain, as he feared (4:14) when he was sent forth to be “a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth”? And how is it that Cain was a “tiller of the ground” (4:2), when “Noah was the first tiller of the soil” (9:20)? And so forth.

One of the most surprising aspects to questions of this kind is not that they should arise, but that the questioner somehow should think that he had shrewdly puzzled out an abstruse problem that had previously eluded careful reading of the Bible. Any schoolboy can recognize discrepancies of this kind. And the author of Genesis, whom we should know by now to have been no fool, could recognize them just as easily as we – far more easily, in fact.

It is true, some of the older commentators were inclined to take these problems almost as seriously as fundamentalist interpreters, or fundamentalist scoffers like Ingersoll. Why this is so, has been dealt with in an earlier chapter. Our better understanding today of the nature of the composition of the book

of Genesis, the purpose it was to serve, and how it was put together from traditional source material, have helped us to avoid similar unnecessary worry.

As to the initial propagation of the human race from an original pair of parents, we should have no difficulty in recognizing that there must have been a considerable amount of intermarriage between very close relatives, even between brothers and sisters. Such marriages, in fact, continued down into historical times among certain peoples, such as the Egyptians. Among most people laws later forbade such marriages, and these laws were based on sound natural reasons. But obviously such marriages were a necessity in the beginning of human history.

This much common sense tells us. There is, however, nothing about the early propagation of mankind taught in the Bible

## Cain and Abel

The story of Cain and Abel in Genesis 4:1-16 has been included by the author not to give us information about Adam's immediate descendants, but to continue and amplify the story of Adam's sin, which he expounded in the preceding chapter. To serve this purpose, it was necessary to have some such story about human sin as that which this account provides.

That is the meaning of the story as used by the author. The original story itself which he used, however, had not been intended, when first composed, as a story of "first generation" human beings, but presupposes much later times and development in the human race.

Originally the story contrasted the states of shepherd and farmer – both much later developments, of course – and judged in favor of the former, which received God's blessing. It is precisely such a story that would have been eagerly told by a shepherd people like the Israelites. Thus we can readily understand the fact that a widespread population is supposed by the narrative. In the original story, therefore, there was no question of any problem about Cain's wife or his enemies, because in the original story the narrative did not concern an immediate son of Adam.

As used by the author and adapted to his purposes, however, Cain is presented as Adam's immediate son. In this way the author can show better the connection between the sin of murder and Adam's fall. But as the author was not concerned with questions of generation and marriage, the purely natural facts of early human history, he has left the details in the story without



alteration. It is consequently erroneous to try to find literary connections between chapters 3 and 4 that the author did not intend.

Another point that the author wanted to make in this story was the increase of sin among Adam's descendants, gradually building up to the climax of the Flood. Thus, at the end of the Cain episode, when Cain fears that he will be destroyed by men for his crime, he is assured by the Lord that the fear of terrible vengeance, sevenfold, will dissuade men. This supposes the tribal times, when blood revenge was taken on a man's relatives for his own crimes. It is the author's way of telling us how strong and unchecked the tendency to murder and lawlessness became.

The theme carries over in the next episode, the story of Lamech. Lamech, who is connected with Cain by a genealogy to show his connection, is seen as extending and increasing the violence characteristic of Cain. This passage (4:17-24) is another ancient source taken over by the author and joined to the preceding. Originally it contained various other bits of knowledge, such as the names of the traditional originators of the various arts and crafts, but the author of Genesis has not included it for these purposes, which hardly concern him.

## Revenge

His use is confined to the picture of Lamech, descendant of Cain, by whose time blood vengeance is now exacted seventy-sevenfold, and no longer simply for murder, but for an insult.

When the Pentateuch reaches the point of setting forth the Mosaic Law, it will be seen how genuinely the latter was a vast improvement over the misrule before the covenant of Sinai. The Mosaic legislation will restrict vengeance to the norm of strict justice: "An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth" (Exodus 21:24). Christ will substitute for it the even more perfect law of charity: "Forgive not seven times, but seventy times seven" (Matthew 18:22).

As already noted, the author of Genesis has added at the end of chapter 4 a short reference to others of Adam's descendants, to show that with Cain and Lamech the picture is not complete. There were also good men in the world.

## Author's Meaning

One of the most intriguing passages in the first eleven chapters of Genesis is 6:1-4. "When men began to multiply on the face of the ground, and

daughters were born to them, the sons of God saw that the daughters of men were fair; and they took to wife such of them as they chose.... The Nephilim were on the earth in those days, and also afterward, when the sons of God came in to the daughters of men, and they bore children to them. These were the mighty men that were of old, the men of renown.”

It is not difficult to see what the author intended these verses to mean. In his story, for they serve as the immediate introduction to the story of the Flood, and his own commentary on their meaning is contained in 6:5: “The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.”

The difficulty consists in determining what the passage originally meant, before it was taken from its earlier context and incorporated by the author in the story of Genesis.

Apparently the story was originally a myth describing the generation of the Nephilim, or giants, also identified as “the mighty men,” similar to the “titans” of Greek mythology, from a union of gods and human women. The “sons of God” in 6:2 probably originally meant “the gods,” that is, “sons-of-god.” This term is used for the gods in the languages of the Canaanites, Babylonians, and others with whom the Israelites had contact. A belief in a primitive superhuman race of giants was common in the folklore of ancient peoples.

This was, therefore, in all likelihood what the passage meant when it had been first composed. But that is not what the author of Genesis meant by using it.

Whether he believed in an ancient race of giants or not, we do not know. The point is immaterial. He certainly did not believe in the gods of pagan mythology, and he consequently did not believe that there could be a union of marriage between them and men.

Regardless of their original meaning, therefore, he probably intended “sons of God” in his narrative to stand for the good people of the earth, symbolized by the descendants of Seth, and the “daughters of men” to refer to the evil people, symbolized by the descendants of Cain. Hence under his transforming hands this myth ceases to be a myth and is worked into a development that expresses an historical fact. The evil and good people of the world, he says, were hopelessly intermingled. One of the specific evils of those ancient times that he wished to condemn was polygamy. Hence the emphasis on the fact that “they took to wife such of them as they chose” (6:2). Thus he

is prepared to make the summation of v. 5 that leads into the Lord's decision to bring on the chastisement of the Flood.

## Meaning of Babel

In Genesis (11:1-9) occurs the famous story of the tower of Babel. We have already briefly noted the purpose that this story plays in the author's scheme of Genesis. By it he shows that, even after the chastisement of the Flood, men remained evil, likely to rebellion against God, filled with pride and their own self-sufficiency.

The original purpose served by the account, however, before it was used by the author, was somewhat different. It was a primitive attempt to explain the origins of the various languages in the world.

The story is obviously Mesopotamian in origin. It describes an event that took place in Shinar, the ancient word for Babylonia. The building described is typically Mesopotamian: mud bricks joined together with bitumen or asphalt. The ancient cities that have come to light beneath the archaeologist's spade in Mesopotamia were constructed precisely in this way. There was probably the construction of some extraordinary tower that provides the historical basis of the story. The "tower" in question, incidentally, was the *ziggurat*, or great stepped temple that was the characteristic of Mesopotamian cities.

The original purpose of the story was to explain the origin of different languages as the means adopted by the Deity to disperse the men who were building this temple. Thus a play on words is made, between Babel, the supposed location of the site of the tower, and the Hebrew word *balal*, "confuse," "because there the Lord confused the language of all the earth." This is known as "popular etymology," extremely common in the Bible and ancient literature in general. We could, more heartlessly and less pedantically, call it "punning." The name Babel was actually derived from two Babylonian words meaning "the gate of the god."

In taking over this story and using it for his purposes, the author of Genesis did not intend this naive explanation of the world's languages to be included as part of his teaching. In the first place, we know that his purpose in writing Genesis was not to do any such thing. Furthermore, in the genealogy given in chapter 10 he has already supposed the "languages, families, and nations" to be determined throughout the world (10:5, 20, 31, 32).



## VIII

### A CONCLUDING WORD

Obviously we have been unable to do much more than scratch the surface in these few pages regarding some of the problems of interpretation and incidental difficulties of the first chapters of Genesis. There are many more problems which we have not considered. There are many other facts which should be taken into consideration in offering an adequate understanding of this interesting book of the Bible.

We feel, however, that we have at least been able to take up in a satisfactory manner the chief teachings of the Biblical author, and to dismiss at least a few of the difficulties that beset the path of the ordinary reader.

The foregoing synthesis represents a sketchy summary of what we consider to be the best opinion on the meaning of Genesis now held by Catholic Biblical scholars. In this interpretation they are following out the directives of the Pontifical Biblical Commission, instituted by the Pope to promote Biblical studies, which wrote in 1948:

“The question of the literary forms of the first eleven chapters of Genesis is...obscure and complex. These literature forms do not correspond to any of our classical categories and cannot be judged in the light of the Greco-Latin or modern literary types. It is therefore impossible to deny or to affirm their historicity as a whole without unduly applying to them norms of a literary type under which they cannot be classed. If it is agreed not to see in these chapters history in the classical and modern sense, it must be admitted also that known scientific facts do not allow a *positive* solution of all the problems which they present. The first duty in this matter incumbent on scientific exegesis consists in the careful study of all the problems, literary, scientific, historical, cultural, and religious connected with these chapters; in the next place is required a close examination of the literary methods of the ancient

oriental peoples, their psychology, their manner of expressing themselves, and even their notion of historical truth; the requisite, in a word, is to assemble without preformed judgments all the material of the palaeontological and historical, epigraphical and literary sciences. It is only in this way that there is hope of attaining a clearer view of the true nature of certain narratives in the first chapters of Genesis.

## New Interpretations

Commenting on these words, one of the most distinguished and oldest of the non-Catholic biblical journals stated: "It would be hard to state more explicitly the attitude of the best modern Old Testament scholarship towards the problems of the early chapters of Genesis."

Some believing Christians will find a few of these explanations new. That is to be expected. Biblical interpretation has not, happily, remained stagnant while all the other sciences and arts have been busily developing. Better explanations than those now offered, we may devoutly hope, will be included in what the future will bring. To all, Catholic and non-Catholic, we can do no better than cite the words of Pius XII, written in his famous encyclical letter of 1943 for the promotion of biblical studies:

## Hear The Church

"Let all the children of the Church...avoid that somewhat indiscreet zeal which considers everything new to be for that very reason a fit object for attack or suspicion. Let them remember above all that the rules and laws laid down by the Church are concerned with the doctrine of faith and morals and that among the many matters set forth in the legal, historical, sapiential and prophetic books of the Bible, there are only a few whose sense has been defined by the authority of the Church, and that there are equally few concerning which the opinion of the Holy Fathers is unanimous.... The true freedom of the sons of God, loyally maintaining the doctrine of the Church, and at the same time gratefully accepting as a gift of God, and exploiting every contribution that secular knowledge may afford, must be vindicated and upheld by the zeal of all, for it is the condition and source of any real success, of any solid progress in Catholic science."

"The word of our God endures forever!" (Isaiah 40:8).

## A B O U T   T H E   A U T H O R

Father Bruce Vawter, C.M., was a Professor of Religious Studies at De Paul University, Chicago. His field of study and teaching was sacred Scripture. This text, written about 1969, is theologically solid and it addresses the questions still asked today.









*"Faith is a gift of God which enables us to know and love Him. Faith is a way of knowing, just as reason is. But living in faith is not possible unless there is action on our part. Through the help of the Holy Spirit, we are able to make a decision to respond to divine Revelation, and to follow through in living out our response."*

– United States Catholic Catechism for Adults, 38.

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Pope John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici* 34  
Apostolic Exhortation on the Vocation and Mission  
of the Lay Faithful in the Church and the World

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