

## The Image of God's Image

Because of its position at the beginning of the Bible and because of its subject matter, the account of creation in Gen.1:1-2:4a is one of the most familiar and impressive passages of the Bible. Yet to a generation that has landed men on the moon, is exploring the planets, and is conducting scientific research in cosmology, there may be a temptation to dismiss Gen. I, as irrelevant for our sophisticated and technologically advanced age. Although its cosmology is certainly not ours and its language is somewhat quaint and remote, if approached with patience and on its own terms, Gen. I, speaks with surprising power and relevance to the present.<sup>1</sup>

### I.

In order to clearly hear Gen. I, we must remind ourselves that we frequently bring to the perception of a biblical text certain theological presuppositions of which we are often unconscious, but which powerfully shape our understanding. One of the presuppositions that has created innumerable problems for the understanding of Gen. I is the assumption that the conception of the universe reflected here is revealed truth.<sup>2</sup>

The cosmology of Gen. I, as of the Bible in general, is of a three-storied, earth-centered universe, overarched by a gigantic super-dome,

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<sup>1</sup>For a thorough listing of the relevant literature on Gen. I and the extra-biblical parallels, cf. C. Westermann, Genesis 1-11 (Biblicher Kommentar; Neukirchener-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1974), pp. 97-107. Cf. also, B. W. Anderson, Creation Versus Chaos (New York: Association Press, 1967); L. Gilkey, Maker of Heaven and Earth (Christian Faith Series; Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday, 1959); C. H. Long, Alpha: The Myths of Creation (New York: G. Braziller, 1963); D. O'Conner and F. Oakley, eds., Creation: The Impact of an Idea (New York: Scribner's, 1969); J.A. Sanders, The Old Testament in the Cross (New York: Harper, 1961, ch. 2); C. Westermann, Creation and Faith Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974); W. Zimmerli, The Old Testament and the World (Atlanta: John Knox, 1976), pp. 14-52.

<sup>2</sup>The fallacy of this assumption was pointed out long ago by S. R. Driver, The Book of Genesis. Westminster Commentaries, (Longdon: Methuen and Co., Ltd., 1904), pp. 19-33, esp. p. 33.

the firmament or heavens. The firmament is conceived as quite solid, for it supports above it an inexhaustible body of water, whence come the rains when the windows of heaven are opened. Underneath the earth there is a second cosmic body of water, which supplies springs, lake, and streams. Above the firmament is the abode of God and his angels. Beneath the earth, in sheol, is the abode of the dead.<sup>3</sup>

Now even the most meager knowledge of the ancient world discloses that there is nothing unique about this cosmology. It was shared, with slight modifications, by the entire ancient world. In short, the cosmological ideas of Gen. I, belong to the thought world of the Bible and are simply assumed. God does not speak over the heads of those to whom he addresses himself. He meets them where they are and reveals his truth through the thought forms that are current and intelligible.

In a visionary experience, recorded in 4:23-26, the prophet Jeremiah sees the universe becoming undone and reverting to primeval chaos. Somewhat after the analogy of Jeremiah's vision, the author of Gen. I has dismantled the universe as it was understood in his day and put it back together again. It is the way in which he puts it back together that is expressed the revelation God has given him. The cosmological ideas of Gen. I, are the earthen vessels in which a wonderful heavenly treasure is borne. But we must not confuse the earthen vessel with the heavenly treasure.

## II.

There is another presupposition frequently brought to Gen. I, that seals the meaning of the passage to our understanding, viz., that it is concerned only with the past and the communication of factual information designed to satisfy our intellectual curiosity. A careful study of Gen. I, soon makes it clear that as this passage deals with the origin of things it also addresses itself to the burning issues of its own time, c. 500 B.C.<sup>4</sup> and it does this with an evangelistic zeal.

Some of the issues Gen. I, addresses itself to, while of urgent concern at that time, are no longer live issues for us in the same form. Two such issues are fertility and astrology.

In the prescientific world of Gen. I, fertility was universally understood to be controlled by the ritual mating of fertility gods; the sun, moon, and stars were widely thought to be divine and to control the life of mankind in minute detail. These conceptions stand in violent conflict

<sup>3</sup>Cf., e.g., W. Eichrodt, Theology of the Old Testament II (Old Testament Library: Philadelphia: Westminster, 1967), pp. 93ff.

<sup>4</sup>This point is forcefully made by B. D. Napier, From Faith to Faith (New York: Harper, 1955), pp. 29-30, 45, et passim.

with the monotheism of Gen. I, and a primary concern of this passage is to refute them.<sup>5</sup>

With a simplicity and boldness that are difficult for us to appreciate, Gen. I, undercuts the basis of the fertility cults by affirming that God, the Creator, provided plant and animal life with their own power of reproduction from the beginning. This is why Gen. I, is not content simply to say that God created plant life, but is constrained to emphasize that he created "plants yielding seed" and "fruit trees bearing fruit in which is their seed," and this is also why animals and man are commanded to be fruitful and to multiply.

Even bolder is the effort to discredit the assumption that the sun, moon, and stars are divine and control human life and destiny. This is why Gen. I, insists that God is the primary source of light and why it separated the creation of light from the creation of the sun, moon, and stars. This is why it emphasizes that the heavenly bodies have duties to perform, namely, to regulate the alternation of day and night, and to be for signs and seasons. They are not lords, but servants. This concern even accounts for the refusal to call the sun and moon by name, but rather as the greater and lesser lights.

In its attack on the fertility cults and astrology, Gen. I, proclaims the gospel of human liberation from all fraudulent gods and causalities, and ushers us into the presence of the Creator, with whom alone we must come to terms and make our peace. It is a message not without relevance for modern men and women.

### III.

Beyond the urgent issues of fertility and astrology, Gen. I, is concerned with three basic questions that have haunted the human species from the beginning and which continue to concern us, questions to which each of us, consciously or unconsciously, form answers that powerfully shape the course of our everyday lives. These questions are: What is the nature of the universe we live in? What kind of being is man? What is the meaning and purpose of life?

Historically, the Israelites were late-comers to the ancient near east and therefore many efforts had been made to make sense of the riddle of life long before Gen. I, was written. The most widely known and authoritative pronouncement on human life and destiny prior to Gen. I, is contained in a story of creation going back to the Sumerians and given classical form and made official dogma of the state religion by the

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<sup>5</sup>Cf. The penetrating commentary of W. Zimmerli on vs. 11-19 in his, 1. Mose 1-11. Prophezei, 2nd ed. (Zurich: Zwingli Verlag, 1957).

### Babylonians and Assyrians.<sup>6</sup>

This creation story, called *Enuma Elish*, held that creation took place as a result of a primeval conflict between Marduk, the god of order, and Tiamat, the monster of chaos; that Marduk slew Tiamat and from her carcass fashioned the heavens. Then, to free the gods from providing for their own needs, Marduk had a criminal god, Kingu, executed and from his blood created man, who is also called a savage.

It is very clear how *Enuma Elish* answers our three primal questions. The universe partakes of the nature of a monster. It is a threatening hostile place. Mankind is evil by its very nature. Bad blood flows in its veins. Why do human beings exist? Merely to serve the gods and tend their sanctuaries that they may be at leisure. It goes without saying that there are many modern equivalents and variants to the point of view of *Enuma Elish*. Many of the pro-slavery writings of the 19th century, in fact, put *Enuma Elish* to shame.

### IV.

What, then, is the nature of the universe according to Gen. I? Is it, first of all, a universe created, not by violent conflict, as in *Enuma Elish*, or by procreation, as in many other creation stories, but by God's Word. That is to say, it is the result of a deliberate, rational, reflective process, and was an act of freedom. There was no inherent necessity that the universe should come into existence. The only causal connection between its existence and nonexistence was God's Word.<sup>7</sup>

Nothing compelled God to speak his Word. He spoke it because he chose to and because he desired to. It was an act of choice and freedom.

Secondly, God created out of nothing, as it were. The basis of this idea is the Hebrew verb for create, for which there is no exact equivalent in English. This verb, *bara'*,<sup>8</sup> is restricted in usage to God. Man cannot *bara'*; only God can. And there is never any reference to materials utilized when this verb is used. What the concept of creation out of nothing is concerned to say is simply that there was nothing which limited or frustrated God's intention for creation in any way.

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<sup>6</sup>For the full text of *Enuma Elish* in English translation, cf. J. B. Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*. 3rd. ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), pp. 60-72, 501ff. For the interpretation of this account of creation, cf. the literature cited by Westermann, *Genesis*, pp. 99-100 and by W. Beyerlin, ed., *Near Eastern Religious Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (Old Testament Library: Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978), p. 81.

<sup>7</sup>Cf. D. Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall* (New York: Macmillan, 1959), pp. 19-21.

<sup>8</sup>This term is discussed by a number of authorities in J. Botterweck & H. Ringgren, eds., *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament II* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1975), pp. 242-249 and cf. W. Eichrodt, *op. cit.*, pp. 99-106.

This is made emphatically clear by the fact that after each creative act, God inspects it and pronounces it good. What he created did not fall short of his intention and expectation. The result was exactly what he had in mind when he spoke the command of creation.

For some strange reason there is a tendency among us to think of this world as the wrong place for mankind; that the goal of life is to escape to some purer, higher, nobler realm. The Bible, however, affirms that this world is no cosmic Siberia, but the right and proper place for you and me.<sup>9</sup> Biblical religion is possibly the most worldly of all religions. It knows of life beyond this life, of course, but no religion places such a premium on the goodness and importance of life in this world, here and now. It does not call for escape from this world, but for the correction of the imperfections of this life through justice and righteousness.

Because of its emphasis on the goodness of creation and the importance of life in this world, Gen. I, is a divine mandate and a solemn summons to devise means and establish programs that make life humane, sweet, and good for everyone, here and now.

#### V.

The nature of man is another one of those fundamental, life-shaping questions Gen. I, deals with. The first point made about man is that he is no chance, accidental development. This thought is expressed by placing the creation of man in the context of a special divine assembly. Until the creation of man, God had created by saying, "Let there be. . .," "Let the earth bring forth. . .," etc. Now he says, "Let us make man." This summons presupposes that all the heavenly beings have been gathered together in formal assembly and participate in the decision to create man.<sup>10</sup>

While stated laconically and without elaboration, the more one ponders God's summons to this special divine assembly the more fascinating it becomes. The creation of mankind was not undertaken lightly. There were some very weighty matters to be decided, among them: Should mankind be mortal or immortal? Should the human species be identical or should there be variety? Was mankind to have dominion over the earth or was it to be in charge of the angels? Were men and women to be created so that they instinctively did what they should, or were they to be entrusted with genuine freedom? How thrilling it would be to know what transpired in that assembly. In the end, a being was

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<sup>9</sup>For a comparison and contrast between the positive valuation of creation in Hebrew thought and its negative valuation in Greek philosophy, cf. C. Tresmontant, A Study of Hebrew Thought (New York: Desclee, 1960).

<sup>10</sup>On the heavenly council in the Old Testament, cf. The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible. Supplementary Vol. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1976), pp. 187-188.

devised, not from bad blood, but in the image of God; a being, to use the language of Ps. 8, only "a little lower than the angels," and crowned with glory and honor.

Many of us yearn to be more intelligent, more handsome or beautiful; more gifted, or even to be someone else. Many of us are plagued with a feeling of insignificance. Our lives seem to have no inherent worth. We feel that we are superfluous, that we are cosmic orphans abandoned on the doorstep of a grudging, inhospitable world. But if we take the biblical understanding of creation seriously, irrespective of the valuation the world imposes upon us, we are somebody. As surely as God knew and fashioned Jeremiah to be a prophet while he was still in his mother's womb, so has he known and lovingly fashioned each of us for a role in the drama of life only we can fill. He has gifted each of us with a music only we can sing, and entrusted each of us with a blessing we can confer. Each of us is like an only son or daughter to God. Each of us is the apple of his eye. Each of us is utterly indispensable to his purposes in the world.

## VI.

Finally, what is the meaning of it all? Why are we here? What is the meaning of your life and mine? The richest and most profound answer to this question is stated in a way that is both obvious yet that makes us unaware. The more one studies Gen. I, the more one becomes conscious of how carefully it is thought through. Every word is significant. The arrangement of every thought has meaning.<sup>11</sup> For example, why is it that while there are eight fundamental acts of creation they have been carefully and skillfully compressed within six days?

The answer to this question, while implicit in the structure of the account, is stated explicitly in 2:2-3. Although the eight basic acts of creation are completed on the sixth day and pronounced very good, there was something still lacking. This is supplied on the seventh day when, as 2:2 states, "God finished his work which he had done." What does God do on the seventh day that constitutes the finishing, crowning touch to his creative activity? He institutes the Sabbath. The Sabbath, then, is the key to the fullest understanding of Gen. I. It floods the entire account with light, making it luminous with purpose and meaning.

The Sabbath, as Rabbi Abraham Heschel has called it, is a palace in time.<sup>12</sup> It is a monument to God's availability to us and his perpetual

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<sup>11</sup>Cf. G. von Rad, Genesis, a Commentary, revised ed.. (Old Testament Library: (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972), pp. 47-48.

<sup>12</sup>A. J. Heschel, The Sabbath (New York: Farrar, Straus and Young, Inc., 1951), p. 21 (an indispensable companion to Gen. I).

invitation to enter into communion and fellowship with him. It is this communion and fellowship of the Sabbath, which should leaven all the days of the week, and give life its meaning and purpose. And it was for the sake of this, according to Gen. I, that God did it all.

It is not that the Sabbath relationship is for some and not for others; or that it makes no real difference in our lives. This companionship with Eternity,<sup>13</sup> this walking and talking with God, are as essential to human life as air and food. For at our core, and beneath all the layers of our being, we are fundamentally spiritual realities. It is as objectively true as anything established by science, that we have a primal need for transcendence, that there is a hunger of the human spirit and a homesickness for our heavenly parent. All the goods of this world alone can never satisfy this need. As Augustine put it: "Thou madest us for Thyself, and our heart is restless, until it repose in Thee."<sup>14</sup> To use the image of Gen. 2 and 3, the communion and fellowship of the Sabbath give us access to the Tree of Life. Indeed, this is life in all its fullness, joy, and radiance; a quality of life that is eternal, and a foretaste of the life to come.

## VII.

Gen. I, then, takes us behind the present disorder and imperfection of life and presents us with a vision of God's intention for us from the beginning. Its image of man and of the possibilities of our lives is truly sublime. At the same time, it is a reminder that we are God's creatures. And it is scarcely possible to overstate the importance of this awareness, for, as the serpent well knew, it is precisely in the matter of our creatureliness that we are most vulnerable. As Gen. 3 pictures with such lucidity, when one misunderstands this, he or she seeks to become like God, i.e., to acquire the ability to control his or her own destiny and to live independently of God. It is not because mankind was created from bad blood that one does wrong. According to the Bible it is when one repudiates one's status as God's creature and tries to live apart from God. When one does this, life becomes entangled and ensnared by alienation, injustice, oppression, violence, tragedy.

God did not create us without awareness of this possibility, of course. I suspect that the issue that was debated longest and hardest in the divine assembly on the sixth day was precisely this prospect. I can imagine one of the wisest of the angels saying, "What if Mankind forgets that we

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<sup>13</sup>The source of this expression is the title of a book, Companion of Eternity (New York: Abingdon, 1961), by a beloved teacher of mine at Berea, Kentucky, Dr. W. Gordon Ross. His inspiration was the Moravian educational reformer, theologian, and churchman, Johann Amos Comenius (1592-1671).

<sup>14</sup>The Confessions of Saint Augustine (The Modern Library; New York: Random House, 1949), p. 3.

have created them and think and live as if we do not exist?" I am convinced that Project Mankind would have come to an end then and there if, after patiently hearing the objections and counter-proposals of the angels, God had not finally said, "Well, if need be, I'll send my Son."

With these words a certain hush and feeling of awe must have come over the angels. They had not realized how much God yearned to share his love with mankind and treasured mankind's free and voluntary response to his love. The intensity and genuineness of this love must have caused the heavenly host and even nature itself to break forth into singing. After the rejoicing had died away and with all the host of heaven drawn up about him in joyful anticipation and gripped with unbearable suspense, "God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them."