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THE CREATION AND FALL

‘In the beginning, *God* created the heavens and the earth’ (Gen. 1:1)

I suppose the most difficult section of the whole Bible is the Pentateuch. And I suppose the most difficult book of the whole Pentateuch is the first one, Genesis. And I suppose the most difficult chapters of Genesis are the first three, on the Creation and Fall. Is it possible to say anything worthwhile on these three chapters without getting hopelessly tied up in the difficulties they contain?

The difficulties are real enough, at least as far as modern readers like ourselves are concerned. They stand out a mile. Here is a universe produced from start to finish in six days, when we know that it took millions of years to arrive at the shape in which it is described here. Here is an earth created before the sun, when we know that without the heat of a sun there would not have been an earth. Here is light, too, created before the existence of sun and moon and stars, when we know that they are the cause of light. Here is an earth even covered with vegetation before there is any sun, when we know that without the sun vegetation cannot exist. Here is the brute creation split up conveniently from scratch into domestic animals and wild animals, when we know that there were no domestic animals before man tamed them. Here finally is man, moulded into shape from the very start by the hands of a rather anthropomorphic God, when we know, or at least like to think, that along with the rest of creatures he passed through a long process of evolution. And then you turn the page to Chapter 2, to find that the whole process apparently starts all over again, only this time in an even more impossible order, with man as the first creature to appear on the earth, and vegetation only after he is there to irrigate it, and the brute creation only when God is trying to provide him with a helpmate.

Those are the sort of difficulties that people have thrown up against the first pages of Genesis, with a flourish, as much as to say: ‘There, that is all that Moses knew about Science.’ But did we honestly expect anything different? Dr Johnson was once asked by a lady how he could ever have allowed a certain mistake to appear in his Dictionary. ‘Ignorance, Madam,’ he said, ‘stark ignorance.’ And we might, without disrespect, say the same of the author of Genesis. When it came to palaeontology, botany, zoology, biology or anthropology he was ignorant. And so of course was everybody else until the last few hundred years. I know you will read books which show how in fact the account of creation in Genesis squares exactly with the

findings of modern Science, how in fact modern discoveries were wonderfully anticipated in the Bible. A recent enthusiast has even found that the rib taken from Adam in his sleep corresponds exactly with the separation of the sexes in the primitive cellular life which might be called the pre-conscious life of man ! But these attempts to line up Genesis alongside Science are always faintly ridiculous, like trying to confer a B.Sc. on Moses. The fact is that he knew nothing, or very little, of what modern Science has since discovered. If it had been revealed to him by God he could not even have been understood until this century. And supposing it had been revealed to him, and your Genesis had started off something like this : ' In the beginning, three thousand million years ago, the earth was a flaming mass of gas, shot off into space as a minute particle of a much larger explosion, gradually condensing into a cortex solid enough to allow, after two and a half thousand million years, the first appearance of life . . .' would you have bothered to read any further ?

No, there *is* no attempt to be scientific here. The picture which our author has of the world is, if you like, a child's one—an immense tea-tray resting on pillars and covered with an inverted colander. But it is the only one he has, the only one any of his contemporaries had, and therefore the only one which anybody of his time could use if he wanted to tell us anything about the world. And what he wants to tell us is not *how* or *when* the world came to be, or even how or when man came to be. Why should he ? God could well leave us to find that out on our own. He wants to tell us *what* the world is, and *what* man is. And here we really are on to something important.

We are perhaps too accustomed to the religious teaching of Genesis to feel very thrilled by it any more. The religious truths about God and creation and man have become so much part of our own culture and civilisation that they no longer hit us between the eyes. But imagine a world with a rather more depressing philosophy than the one we have grown up in ; where the word 'god' means a whole pantheon of grotesque powers that are constantly at war with each other ; where the elements themselves are deified into something eternal and evil, independent of the gods and hostile to them ; where the universe achieves its present shape only after an interminable struggle between the gods. . . .

Imagine that, and then turn to Genesis, with all its simplicity and calm and grandeur : ' In the beginning, *God* created heaven and earth and all that they contain.' There is a majestic dignity about such an opening, which introduces the one God of the Hebrews, supreme and eternal, with such sublime assurance that He can be presumed as an

unarguable fact. It is to *Him* that all things owe their existence, so that they appear without effort, at a word from His mouth. Don't let us, with our apologetic mentality, get all worried about the word 'created.' Did the author mean that it all came *directly* from God's hands? Or did he leave room for the gradual development and evolution of the species? We are missing the point. The how and when are bypassed. All that matters here is that the whole universe depends on this one God, that every law of nature is the fulfilment of His command, that there is nothing that has any existence apart from His will. And that is why, as the inventory is made, in all its order and beauty—light and darkness, earth and sky, sea and dry land, trees and vegetation and plants, fish and reptiles, wild beasts and tame—each item is greeted with the refrain, 'And God saw that it was good'; and the catalogue comes to an end with 'And God saw that it was very good.' All of it *His* making and in accordance with *His* will. You will look in vain among the ancient literature of other peoples for such a categorical expression of their faith. This is something unique.

After the creation of the universe, the creation of man. And here the world for which Genesis was written was just as pessimistic. When your universe has been deified into malignant powers that are constantly at war with each other, your man can be little more than a cog in their machine, a pitiful creature whose only reaction to them is fear and a constant concern to placate them. In such a world man's life is cheap, hard, uncertain, and at the mercy of gods who envy him even his happiness.

Again it is that sort of background against which we must re-read Genesis, to appreciate its defence of man's dignity. And how superbly it is done; how well it is, if you like, stage-managed, with man deliberately kept back as the last item, the star turn. In fact he is kept in the wings so long that you hardly expect him to come on any more, with the author committed to six acts, and the sixth already pretty crowded with the production of the whole animal kingdom. But a final fanfare announces the last item: 'Let us make man.' The rest of creation has appeared almost as a divine aside—'Let there be light, let there be a firmament, let the earth bring forth living creatures, and it was so.' But not man. No mass-production for him. He is unique, and demands God's undivided deliberation and attention—'Let US make man.' And 'let us make him in OUR OWN image and likeness.' None of that for the other creatures. They were like the sea they came out of, or the earth on which they swarmed. But man is like God. Man is a reflection of the God who has just been described, someone who shares His goodness, His gift for order, His

dominion over the rest of creation, His capacity for creating. The mere thought of it is so overpowering that the author suddenly bursts into poetry :

And God created man in His own image
 In the image of God He created him
 Male and female He created them.

You can hear the applause of the audience.

And if there is a different account of creation in Chapter 2, with man placed first on the list instead of last, don't let us get so excited over the difference that we forget to see the same point being made, that man cannot be lumped along with the rest of creatures. He is unique, and the rest is made for him. And if this time the whole story is more picturesque, with a Divine Potter modelling man with His own hands and breathing into him His own breath, don't let us be so prosaic about it that we miss the main point : man's unique relationship with God. And if that relationship is illustrated even further by the garden in which God walks with Adam in the cool of the evening, don't let us try to find the garden on a map. Could anyone have devised a more dramatic way of presenting the close intimacy with himself that God planned for man from the beginning ? It is we who have made up the myth of an Old Testament God of thunder and terror and fear. It is not so in Genesis.

As with man, so with woman. For the ancient world woman was little more than a superior beast of burden, one of the things a man possessed. You had a horse and some cows and a dozen sheep . . . and a woman. And when that world deified the female principle into a goddess and sanctified sexual excess into an act of worship, woman was only degraded the more. When man made himself the slave of the goddess of sex, woman became the slave of man.

In such an atmosphere our Genesis comes like a breath of fresh air, with its deliberate review of the whole animal world, and man scanning the whole fantastic procession to stress that it is not there that his partner is to be found. We are looking for something fitting the dignity that has been conferred on *him* ; and it is this that God eventually produces, a help 'meet' for him, someone equal in rank to him, who can be his companion and complement. If again this truth is acted out, dramatically, with a Divine Surgeon performing the operation and applying the narcotic, don't let us get hot under the collar. You could hardly find a more vivid symbol of the fact that, as God designed her, woman really is identical in nature with man, bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh, made of the same stuff as he is, equal with him and so worthy of him.

And it is the same with marriage, which is mentioned in the same

breath with almost a gasp at the beauty of it as God designed it. Woman has been made *for* man, and man is almost incomplete until she finds again that place next to his heart where he misses her. If man has been made the king of creation, it is marriage that has been made to be his crown.

A universe designed by a good God, in which all is order and beauty, of which man is the masterpiece, woman his companion and marriage its crowning beauty : there is the climax which is built up by the first two chapters of Genesis, as an answer to the pessimism of the ancient philosophies. And then comes the anti-climax. Because however much that was God's ideal, the author knows as well as we do that it is not the reality. And so Chapter 3, with the serpent, the tree of knowledge, the apple and the fig-leaves.

Let us remind ourselves again that these chapters are dealing with matters of life and death, however picturesque their detail and however childish their imagery. The author was not trying to answer the question why serpents crawl on their belly when all decent animals have legs. He had a rather more important question on his mind : how a world which had left the hands of God so entirely good could ever have turned into the world we know. And so if he answers by pointing to a certain tree which is 'a delight to the eyes and eagerly to be desired,' we will know that we are dealing with something more than a mere bite out of an apple. The tree is called the 'tree of the knowledge of good and evil,' an apt name for that determination, which lies at the root of all sin, to choose one's own good and evil. The tempter can well suggest to man that its fruit will make him like God. It does indeed. Man alone of all creatures, by choosing his own good and evil, can claim his independence of God. Man alone of all creatures has been made so much in the likeness of God that he can become a caricature of God.

There is the explanation of the evil in the world—man's decision to be his own god. A universe which was created entirely good has become, through man, 'good and evil.' He was the kingpin, and once that has gone there is an end to the equilibrium that God had put in the universe, and in its place there is only tension ; tension between man and God, between man and nature, between man and man, between man and woman, tension even in man himself, his original harmony turned into a lifelong struggle with himself.

The first introduction of the Lord God into this chapter, with his awkward questions, might suggest the accusing finger of an angry parent. And yet it was not at all in anger that he came. Almost the first detail that is mentioned is his care to make clothes for man, to

cover the embarrassment which sin had left. Quaint enough, but you could hardly find a more charming expression of God's concern and love for man even in his sin. And when the punishment is finally pronounced, it is not man and woman who are cursed but the serpent. The serpent, who had hoped to find in woman an ally, has only her enmity promised to him, and she the assurance that her progeny would make good the harm that she had done in yielding to him, so much so that it would one day conquer him in final defeat and leave him as helpless as a serpent writhing its futile tail round the feet of someone crushing its head. In spite of the tragedy of sin the chapter finishes on that note of optimism that has characterised the whole story from the beginning.

I may have given the impression all along that Genesis made sense only if you contrasted it with the pagan ideas of the time in which it was written. But it will make just as good a contrast, if not a better one, with the pagan ideas of our own time. The ancients had a pretty crude idea of the divinity, but at least they paid him the compliment of respecting him. It needed the modern world to make God after its own image and likeness. The ancient world had a pretty pessimistic view of man's struggle with a hostile universe; but it needed the modern world to raise a hue and cry for man's missing link and forget entirely the link he has with God. The ancient world's worship of sex degraded woman to the level of a beast, and even the Jews, who were taught to see God's angle on it, themselves fell far behind their ideal (the pious Jew in his night prayers still thanks God for not making him a woman). But it needed the modern world to achieve the hypocrisy of talking of the emancipation of woman when it has exaggerated sex to a degree which might have made even the ancients blush. Even we Catholics might well go back to Genesis for an examination of conscience on our own attitude to sex. In the *Opera Omnia* of the great theologian Suarez the index has only one reference under the word Woman: 'cf. *Scandalum*.'

The author of Genesis is not concerned with fairy stories. He is concerned with God's plans for the world and for mankind. He does not set out to teach us the natural sciences. He has quite enough to do to teach us our supernatural science, of the one supreme God to whom everything owes its existence, of man's place in God's scheme, of man's dignity and his failure to live up to it, and of God's love for him even in his sin. The last hundred years have seen a rather sorry history for these chapters. We have covered them with so much sterile criticism on the one hand, and with so much apologetic defence

‘ BARABBAS WAS A ROBBER ’

on the other, that we have left ourselves no time to listen to this time-less message that the poor author was trying to get across. We are just about coming out of the wood now. Don't let us return to it. Don't let us become so engrossed with our discovery of electricity that we let it eclipse the sunlight.

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‘ BARABBAS WAS A ROBBER ’

Teachers of Sacred Scripture, as of other subjects, often feel the need to introduce into their lectures both the occasional lighter touch that is necessary in all teaching, and that incentive to personal investigation of the Sacred Text itself that is the ultimate aim of all Scripture teaching. One of the ways in which they might do this is the demonstration in actual working-out of the meaning of a term or phrase occurring in Sacred Scripture, which is at once not serious enough to matter very much anyway and yet sufficiently topical, or whatever it may be, to arouse and hold the interest of the student. It is suggested that the following notes may serve as an example of what can be done in this line of ‘detection’ by both teacher and pupil without much more equipment than a very rudimentary knowledge of the Greek language and access to a few good dictionaries and commentaries. New Testament experts—for whom this is not written—will, of course, recognise the source of the impulse to undertake this particular piece of detective work in Pickl's *The Messiah*, and suspect the present urge to put it in print as originating in the notes of the new translation of the New Testament into English published by the Jesuit Father Kleist and my own confrère Father Joseph Lilly in America.

Who was Barabbas? At least the average clerical student, and perhaps even the educated Catholic layman, hearing this question, will at once remember the Chronista singing *Erat autem Barabbas latro* in the Passion on Good Friday, call on the remnants of a classical schooling, add the resources of Cabrol and his *Holy Week Book*, and answer triumphantly that St John says ‘Barabbas was a robber’ and that settles that! But did he? And does it?

St John, after all, did not write in the Latin of the *Missale Romanum* or in the English of Cabrol's *Holy Week Book*. What he actually said was *en de ho Barabbas lestes*, and the real question is: does that mean