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The Vision of the Hebrew Scriptures

I) *The Genesis Texts*

When we are confronted with the biblical texts commonly associated with the theology of creation, current biblical scholarship calls on us to make an important decision about how to approach the Bible. If one sees the opening chapter of Genesis as a realistic description of the first six days of cosmic history, the conclusion seems unavoidable that there is a massive contradiction between the Bible and modern science. If, on the other hand, one approaches the biblical text through the insights of historical, textual criticism, the situation will be very different.

For those who take historical criticism as their guide, it is common to distinguish between the physical world-view that seems to stand behind the biblical texts and the religious message that the texts attempt to communicate. From the perspective of contemporary science, the physical world-view reflected in the texts is best described as archaic. But the religious message involved in the texts may yet be rich and important for human understanding. Also, among those who take historical criticism as a point of departure, it is common today to see the opening chapters of Genesis as coming from two different traditions. The older tradition, known as the Yahwist tradition because of the name it uses most commonly for God, is understood to begin with Genesis 2:4b. This tradition dates back to the tenth century B.C.E. The more recent tradition, known as the Priestly tradition because of the identity of its author or redactor, is dated at the time of the Babylonian Exile, that is around the sixth or fifth

century B.C.E., or shortly thereafter. We shall comment first on the Priestly account and then on the Yahwist.

The Priestly account opens the book of Genesis in its present form. It is this account that begins with a description of the familiar six days of divine creative activity followed by the seventh day of divine blessing and rest (Gen 1:1–2:4a). The creative work of God is expressed with the Hebrew word *bara*. This word is used in the Bible only for divine activity, and it singles out such activity as unique and different from all creaturely activity. In this case, it is an activity which simply places a beginning for all that exists in the world. The author uses another metaphor for this divine activity; namely, the metaphor of divine speech. "Then God said: let there be . . ." and it came to be. The use of this metaphor of a commanding speech emphasizes the divine transcendence together with the personal character of God.

This remarkable text opens our vision to an orderly world that in its essence is declared by the Creator to be good; and, indeed, very good (Gen 1:31). One hears nothing of the matter/spirit dualism found in some Hellenistic philosophies and some Near Eastern religions. Creation is not just a question of spiritual existence; it is an issue of material existence as well. While humanity is deeply related to the rest of the created order, God has a particular aim for the human race. Humanity is created in the image and likeness of God.

> Then God said: "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. . . ." So God created man in his image; in the divine image he created him; male and female he created them. God blessed them saying, "Be fertile and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it. Have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and all living things that move on the earth" (Gen 1:26-28).

According to the wide consensus of contemporary exegetes, this is probably best seen not as a statement of the essence of human nature, but as a statement of a function. It points to humanity's relation to all other living creatures and to the earth as a whole. Human beings are intimately interwoven with the rest of the created order. The role of humanity is to live in such a way that the loving creativity of God will become manifest within the created order through human relations with other humans and with the non-human world. The life-style of humans should reflect in the world the loving, creative care of God for all of creation.

It has been common over the years to interpret the text we have just cited in such a way that the image of God referred only to the male. Contemporary exegesis commonly argues that this is inaccurate, and that the function of the divine image refers to both the male and the female. Both share in the same divinely given task with respect to the created order.

The Priestly account reaches its highpoint with the symbolism of the seventh day. God has finished the work of creation and now rests on the seventh day. "So God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it God rested from all the work that had been done in creation" (Gen 2:3).

This may be seen as a legitimation of the Jewish practice of Sabbath required by the Torah in as far as this practice may now be seen to be rooted in the very origins of the world and inaugurated by the Creator God of the entire world. Torah belongs to the very structure of creation. This may be seen also as a reminder to the people of their obligations to God the Creator symbolized by the Sabbath, for those who live according to the Torah live in harmony with the primal order according to which God has created the world.

The Yahwist account beginning in Genesis 2 is very different. While the Priestly tradition seems to be concerned primarily with the creative relation of God to the world and to all in it, and with humanity's place in the world, the Yahwist tradition seems to be primarily concerned with the failure of humanity to live up to its God-given task. There is a wide-spread agreement among exegetes that the point of departure for the writing of the material in the Yahwist account is not the experience of some eye-witness of the beginnings of human history. It is, rather, the present experience of the writer reflecting on the mystery of human experience as he finds it in his own time and place.

Assuming that the author is a member of the Jewish people, we can envision him to be reflecting not only on his personal experience, but on the experience of his people over the centuries. From this perspective he lays out what may be seen as a description of the polarities of human history not only as they may be seen in the case of the Hebrew people, but as they may be seen in human history as a whole. From this perspective it would be misleading to look to these texts as sources of information about some paradisal situation at the beginning of history.

While the description of the creation of humanity in the first chapter seems to emphasize the dignity of humankind, the text of the second chapter describes humanity graphically in terms of the earthy roots through which humanity is tied to the earth. God is here described as an artist fashioning a human form from the clay of the ground and breathing into it the breath of life (Gen 2:7).

The play on words seen in the Hebrew text is lost in any translation. For in Hebrew the word for ground is *adamah* and the name of that which is formed from the ground is *adam*. It appears that Adam is not first of all a proper name, but a description of the earthy roots of humanity. It might be fair to see this as a way of modifying the temptation to over-state the exalted dignity of humanity suggested in the first chapter. It can be seen also

in relation to what is said later: "The Lord God took the man and settled him in the garden of Eden to cultivate and care for it" (Gen 2:15).

The text goes on to describe how God surrounded Adam with all sorts of animal life, since it is not good for him to be alone. When none of these animals proves to be a suitable partner for the man, God then formed the woman from the rib of the man (Gen 2:21ff.).What is described as the failure of Adam and Eve is best seen not as something that happened once and for all at the outset of human history, but rather as something that is always present in human experience. And Genesis 3 is best read in the wider context of the biblical text up to Genesis 11. The failure of Adam and Eve is described as a failure to deal with limits appropriately. From there, we see the history of humanity as one of mistrust, fratricide, enmity, and discord. Humans find it hard to deal with the other and have a driving tendency to push beyond appropriate limits. The description leads us to the disaster of the flood. The story of Noah leads to a covenant in which the fidelity of God is symbolized with the cosmic sign of the rainbow. From there, the text takes us quickly to the building of the tower of Babel, that eloquent symbol of human pride that leads to the wide-spread division of people and their inability to communicate in a healthy way.

Instead of looking at this narrative as a source of information about specific individuals and events, it might be more helpful to envision it as the overture to an opera. As a well-crafted overture either sets the general mood or actually lays out the principle themes and characters of the opera that is to follow, so the biblical text lays out the basic themes that are constantly enacted throughout human history. The real intent of the text is not to describe specific events and particular individuals of the past. It is, rather, to describe the present situation of humanity as a whole. Humanity is taken from the earth, but is called to a noble destiny. From the beginning, however, humanity has failed by pushing beyond the limits of human nature in the desire to make humans the final arbiters of good and evil. But even in the face of human failure, God does not desert creation. The promise of Gen 3:15 will eventually be seen as the protoevangelium; the first announcement of a savior.

Thus, if we read the text as a unit from Genesis 1 to Genesis 11, we discover a remarkable, dramatic movement. The text begins with a vision of the fundamental harmony of the order of creation; the creative action of God brings order out of chaos. Humanity is integrated into the world in many ways. Rooted in the earth, humanity is called to a God-given responsibility for the good of the whole. We have then seen this juxtaposed with the violent disruption of that order and a near-return to chaos through inappropriate human interventions. Finally, in the story of Noah we discover a new creation placed under the cosmic sign of the rainbow as the sign of God's

everlasting covenant with creation. From here the text moves through a list of genealogies on to the account of Babel, and then quickly to the call of Abraham. The overture has been completed. Now the drama of patriarchal history will begin.

II) *Prophetic Reflection*

A major theme that stands out in the prophetic tradition is the conviction that the creative power of God manifests itself in a dramatic way in the history of Israel. The God who has created them as a people, who has liberated them from Egypt, and who is with them as a saving presence in their journey to the Promised Land is the Creator God who has called the whole of reality into existence and sustains it as its creative Ground. This Creator God is with Israel even in the tragedy of the Babylonian Exile and through the mouth of the prophets promises liberation anew and restoration of the people in its homeland. The creative power of YHWH is contrasted sharply with the impotence of the gods.

> Thus says the Lord, Israel's King and redeemer, the Lord of hosts: "I am the first and I am the last; there is no God but me. Who is like me? Let him stand and speak, make it evident, and confront me with it . . . Is there a God or any Rock besides me? Idol makers all amount to nothing, and their precious works are of no avail, as they themselves give witness . . . Indeed, all the associates of anyone who forms a god, or casts an idol to no purpose, will be put to shame; they will all assemble and stand forth, and will be reduced to fear and shame" (Isa 44, 6-10).

The prophetic vision uses all the language and symbolism of the Mosaic experience to envision the future. This is particularly clear in Deutero-Isaiah and Trito-Isaiah (Isa 40-66). We see here a typological correspondence between beginning of Israel's history as a people and end of history, now projected in rich eschatological imagery. There will be a new creation, and the law will be written on the flesh of human hearts and not on tablets of stone. Behind this movement is the movement to the high monotheism of later Judaism. The God of this people is eventually seen as the God of all creation and of all people.

By creating Israel anew out of the chaos of the Exile, God reveals the original divine power to create order out of chaos. Creation language serves as the language to speak of the restored Israel (Isa 62:1-12). It serves also to evoke the vision of a future which will be a "new creation," "new heavens and a new earth" that brings God's world to its final perfection (Isa 65:17ff). With this we see how the biblical vision looks to the future fulfillment as the goal of God's creative activity.