

Questions about creation

Genesis 1:1-2:3

In spite of perhaps fifty years of fairly settled results of Old Testament scholarship, in spite of many many sermons and many many books, I still find people asking the kind of questions about the opening chapters of Genesis that were being asked at the time of Charles Darwin, when he put the cat among the pigeons with his evolutionary theory. He did the church a service, in a sense, in making people look more critically at this first book of the Bible - to ask what sort of book it was and what it was meant to do.

Please forgive me if all this is old hat, and you know it all well. As I say, I still find people confused about it. Genesis is not the work of one author, most certainly not the work of Moses, to whom the editors of the 1611 Bible ascribed it. Most scholars think it is made up of at least four major documents - to which they give the titles J.E.D.&P.- for reasons I am not going to explain now. There are other documents embedded in it also. But it was not put together in its present form until perhaps getting on for 500 B.C. The earliest document (J) which is of course still older in its oral forms, was first written in the ninth century B.C. The last one was written during the time of the exile in Babylon - perhaps 550 B.C. or a bit later. And it is from this most recent part that the account of creation with which Genesis opens is taken. The second account - the Adam and Eve account - is from the oldest of the sources. So just because it is at the beginning of the first book, we mustn't be fooled. It is one of the last of the Old Testament books to be written. It conflicts quite considerably with the earlier story in Chapter 2 - that didn't seem to worry the Jewish compilers, and I don't see why it should worry us.

It is not a scientific book - a handbook for archaeologists and anthropologists - it is a story. It gets called technically a myth. Now that word gets misunderstood. It doesn't mean to say when you call something a myth that it is a pack of lies. It is a story - no doubt some fact, and some fantasy - which is there to give us some understanding of the big questions about life. All sorts of peoples have produced their myths - they are not legends about historical people - but real stories invented about people who never existed - to tell some truth which is absolutely true. As long ago as 1923, someone put it like this: 'it is a story to answer scientific question! in an age before science, or to answer historical questions in an age when there was no history.' That is a bit rough and ready - but it gets us thinking along the right lines.

The problems with Genesis arise only when we do not see what is myth and what is not. Or when we ask a non-scientific book to answer scientific questions. There are some curiously accurate scientific facts - written before men had the knowledge about these things, Some have argued that this means that we must take the whole thing literally- but that is jumping to very large conclusions. The order of creation appears to be vaguely the same as the order the scientists now tell us is correct. But it also follows the importance of various living things which would have been the way in which people of the 6th century B.C. thought.

There are three kinds of questions we might want to ask about Creation - to which we would require three distinct replies. We may well want to ask questions about the scientific origin of things. We will want to go

back to the origins of man, the evolution of mammals, back to protozoic life in the sea, back to the origin of the earth, the origin of the sun, our galaxy and so on. And these are important and difficult questions. We are only just beginning to understand the complexity of the universe as we have so far discovered it. Scientists can only keep going back from one cause to another. It will press towards an ultimate cause of things. But it can never reach it, because a genuine ultimate cause has no antecedents - nothing to relate to - and the scientist is only exploring these relationships.

That is scientific question about origins. Then 'is there a really real?' there in the Philosophical, or metaphysical (going-beyond the physical). Is there anything that binds all creation together? In people, plants, rocks, stars, whatever you name, is there anything which unites - something which they can all be said in some way to "come from"? As someone has put it is there a centre of things - and if so, what is it?" People of all sorts of faiths and none can and should be searching for the answer to this kind of question. We all do it in a naive kind of way, when we talk about "nature" - as some kind of binding principle. That is the philosophical question.

But the third is the nitty-gritty. Even if we explore some answers to the first two, this one will still face us very clearly. We don't stand outside creation, looking in. We are part and parcel of it. ~'so we are bound to ask how we fit in. What is the point of it all? Is there any sense, and purpose in creation or is it just some vast accident? What is the point of MY being here. I don't want to know HOW I came to be, but WHY. If there is a Creator, what is the relationship with him? Is he in charge now? Does he care about me?

These are the religious questions. And they ultimately **have** to be faced. The philosopher Gilbert Ryle said that if the day comes when all the questions of physics are answered, what we shall have discovered is that not all questions are questions of physics. You can look at a game of snooker, for instance, in a cold scientific way. The balls on the table will behave according to the exact rules of mechanics. But however accurately you describe them, it will not be a satisfactory account of a game of snooker, because to do that you have also to take into account the player - the strategy of the play. You can account scientifically for why the various balls move as they do. But WHY they are made to make these movements is beyond science to answer, it lies in the mind of the player.

And the analogy is simple enough: when we look at creation, we ask the question Why, not the question How. It was that question which engaged the minds of those who formulated the mythological answers we read in Genesis. And their answers remain valid for us today. They say "In the Beginning GOD" - the ultimate source of life is not a principle or a force, but a personality. St John put it even more forcibly in the gospel "In the beginning was the Word" - the creative will of God. And both Genesis and John say together that Creation is God's love **expressed**. It involves us in it. It affirms the power and supremacy of the Creator. It affirms that creation was purposive. It affirms that in spite of all our difficulties, we are part of God's purpose. Our life has a meaning when we relate it to him : We are born not of the will of man, but of God himself. He has given us power to become the sons of God. That is the purpose. Jesus said he came to bring us life in its fullness. The *mystery* of Genesis - the beginning of things, is that God, who created from

nothing, did so for a purpose, and that purpose includes you and me. And we come here to be identified with that purpose. The heavens proclaim the glory of God, says the Psalmist. John said of Jesus: 'We saw his glory, the glory that is his as the only Son of the Father' and we will pray in our worship that we may live and work to his praise and glory.

The writer of Genesis said we were made in God's image. Jesus reaffirmed it with his talk of being Sons of God. And we come to accept that privileged status in creation when we come to communion.