

Two fruitless ways of understanding the first eleven chapters of Genesis

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At least two fruitless ways of understanding the first eleven chapters of Genesis are possible. The first is to view these passages as an historical or quasi-historical account of events happening in the primordial past, as beginnings obscured by the mists of time from our current and immediate human concerns. The second is to see these accounts as myths, understanding myth as legend, and therefore as having little concrete descriptive or explanatory power, as having about as much to do with us as a Babylonian epic. Either interpretation makes these stories distant from us and robs them of any power to concretely affect us now in our situation as humans, to move and challenge us, to present ourselves to us, and to present God and His relationships to us and to creation in our immediate situation.

Helmut Thielicke avoids either of these lines of interpretation. His book, *How the World Began*, is a series of sermons, subtitled *Man in the First Chapters of the Bible*, that constantly relate this material to us today, that illuminate and open our lives, hearts, and personalities, and that present our relationship to God in its immediate difficulty, hope, and splendor.

As a book of sermons, the book is not an academic treatise, yet a scholarly work would do well to present so many intellectual challenges and stimulants; it would almost certainly be duller. In his handling of this material, Thielicke makes it a positive vehicle for our understanding of ourselves, our relationships with others, our faith and doubts and our relationship with God.

The motivation for investigating these chapters of Genesis is that, in order to understand ourselves now, we must know where we have come from and what our original purpose was.

Quite simply, we are seeking the secret of our life, Thielicke says. "The fact is that when we want to know who we men are, we do not investigate, as we do with a rose, the final stage of maturity... we inquire about the bud, we examine his prehistoric origins; in the last analysis we inquire about Adam and Eve... we human beings know very well, or at least suspect, that when we grow older and when the whole human race grows older something is going on that is totally different from the blooming, ripening, and self unfolding which we observe in nature and in a rose."

In order to understand what it is that perverts us and makes us grow bent and misshapen, instead of blossoming and fruitful, we need to understand our origin, and to understand the cloud -- the sin -- that overcame us in the beginning. The first verse of the Bible begins with God, creating out of a void. There was no reporter there, so how can anyone pretend to know what happened? The men who wrote the Bible knew very well that there was no reporter there at the beginning, but they also knew something of the nature of God and man, and they were able, in a few lines, to tell something universal and profound about these problems, something so profound that they speak to all people everywhere with a continuously new and invigorating message. The point of these stories is not reportorial, but to show that God was there in

the beginning and that He is there for me and for us now.

Creation began with light, and according to Genesis 1:3-5 and 14-17, this light preceded the creation of the earth, the sun, and the moon. How could this be? If we understand light as the beginning of beauty and the beginning of divine inspiration and work in the physical realm, as an affirmation that first, above all the world and earth and man's life, however squalid and dreary and dreadful and faithless they may have become, there is this primordial divine illumination and that it is beautiful, then we can begin to understand that God is there and that God is moving and controlling.

We men shrink from the divine light, as the people shrank from and misunderstood Jesus. There is something in our dark hearts that does not want to be enlightened. But if we are willing to receive this divine illumination, then we too can begin to shine with beauty and experience real Joy.

The account in Genesis 1:6-25 presents, a world of primeval beauty, a world we instinctively know differs from the world we now live in. "The autograph of God has disappeared from a great many things in our experience and the traces of the words 'Let there be' have been erased." So we are driven to doubt and despair, especially as we observe the horrors man visits upon his fellows. And we are in confusion as to the origin of these calamities and horrors. We constantly seek and ask for some sign from God, and later from Jesus, as Job called out to God. Why does God always refuse us? It is because God really speaks to our heart when our heart is open to Him. When we come near to the heart of God, then each of us can feel God in his heart, each "you," no matter how seemingly insignificant or great, can be known and loved by God.

The story of the creation of man means at least two important things. First, as man appears among the plants and animals, we are intimately connected with the earth, with the plants and especially the higher animals: we eat, we breathe, we have glandular secretions as they do. We may be the crown of creation, but we cannot be too smug about that. We are, however, all designed by God; however perverse and base we may have become we are •o be bearers of God's crown. But we are still animal, so any religion which becomes so spiritual that it neglects and separates from the physical goes against our created nature. We are to be fruitful, to multiply, and finally to have dominion over creation.

Second, the discussion as to whether man appeared on earth through evolution misses the point. It may well be true that biologically man developed through aeons. But man is different; human sexuality is different; man becomes man when God gives him the spark of life, and this life given to man is different in kind from the life given to animals. It is spiritual life and man is a spiritual being in the spiritual embrace of God. So man's interaction with his fellows, although physical, is also spiritual.

The creation of Adam and Eve, male and female, means that sexuality was part of God's ultimate plan for man from the beginning. Man is not just male and female, but a man and a woman. Today people often begin to wonder in their marriages, "Is this mate, among all possible others, really the one for me?" So they become unfaithful and divorce. There is no provision for this in the original creation. We think, foolishly, that it is the fact that this other person is for me which makes our marriage, but it is really the other way around: marriage makes this other the one for me.

Marriage makes a history, and that history makes us what we are. So the failure of marriage shows a failure of the partners to make themselves one for the other in the union. People become radiant because they are loved; I must not be misled into feeling that I will love that one because he or she is radiant.

The story of the fall of man presents at least two important things to us. The first is the etiology and progression of temptation. The serpent did not come to the woman and say immediately, "Why don't you eat the forbidden fruit?" He began instead with an intellectual discussion of God, beginning at the periphery of her faith, and very gradually working into the core. So it is with us: temptation begins as some little doubt or strange desire that tugs at the corners of our consciousness, and becomes finally overwhelming only when we have give and take with it. Satan does not come to us with an immediate challenge to do evil, but he tries to confuse us, until at last we have given up our defenses and finally succumb to evil, probably having convinced ourselves by that time that it's good. Second, sinful man is unwilling and unable to take responsibility for his sin. Adam shifted the blame to Eve (indirectly blaming God) who shifted the blame to the serpent. In his heart, the serpent certainly blamed God. That is what we do today, we want ultimately to charge our failure to God, to say that He created us with these or those characteristics, that it is these which cause us to sin, and therefore God is responsible. So we persist in our sin unrepentant, instead of coming to God in penitence.

The Cain and Abel story holds worlds of meaning. Cain, as the elder son, had the birthright and was the favorite. His brother, as younger, was insignificant in Cain's eyes. Thus, Cain felt he was entitled to the favor of God, and he had no regard for his brother, just as today those who are big in a worldly way feel themselves entitled to God's blessing more than the insignificant people. But God does not choose that way. So Cain, in his anger at his own rejection and the acceptance of his insignificant brother, killed his brother, and human history began in murder. This heart of Cain, the heart of jealousy and hatred, is in all

our hearts and leads to the bloodshed in the world.

After Cain's murder of his brother, the ground cries out with Abel's blood, so the earth is no longer a place of security for Cain. He becomes instead a wanderer in the earth, always hunting, yet never finding, a place of true security. The harmony that was to exist between man and creation has been severed. Man is doomed to wander always, looking for a home he can never quite find, even in his most comfortable and settled existence there lurks the possibility and impetus toward unsettlement (the case of the Hearst family springs to mind).

Cain's descendants moved toward the east and founded cities. Cities suggest culture, and today, running through all our human culture, we can find the traces of murder and bloodshed. None of our culture is free of the traces of the blood of Abel.

Cain and man cannot return to God, once he is overcome by jealousy and murder, because he has renounced God in his hatred and jealousy of his brother. But in that brother is God. God doesn't announce himself to us in a religious way, but through that person whom we loathe. When we can love him, then God will be there with us.

Many themes are interwoven in the flood story: the second day of creation and the separation of the waters, God's creation of order out of the clouds and seas, the possibility of destruction inherent in this created order, God's execution of His judgment naturally and not supernaturally when man renounces God, man's usually secret and subtle renunciation rather than open and purposeful rebellion, etc. The most important theme however is that God remembered Noah; God remembers those, who are faithful to Him, and He knows how to preserve them and grant security. Also, God's explanation of what happened is given afterwards; Noah did not understand the meaning of what was happening, but had to act on faith. So it is with us.

Noah also showed great faith in that he had no passion for security. He fulfilled his responsibility and then let God do the rest; God shut him into the ark. He could trust God in both the great things and the small ones; he did not stop to settle the elementary things of life, and then turn to God to see what God had for him to do. Instead, immediately after alighting from the ark, before building a house or solving the chaos of mud outside, he erected an altar and prayed. So it is with us: if we do not erect an altar immediately at the beginning of our day, immediately at the beginning of whatever it is that we undertake, we lose the purity of our lives and faith. Our faith must be alive and constantly growing, and growth needs nourishment.

The Tower of Babel is a symbol of man's arrogance, man's belief that he doesn't need God, that he can get along well enough by himself and doesn't want divine interference, with his life and his plans. Man is not content to subdue the earth, as God commanded; but he is determined to be master too. Man was to subdue and cultivate the earth in the name of God, but he goes past that and determines that he can go roughshod over creation, doing whatever he wants because he is free. But he grossly misunderstands freedom. Freedom becomes a pretext for madness, for bloodshed and arrogance, giving rise to a Napoleon or a Hitler. But always, when man has forsaken God's community, he feels a need to create some community or alliance himself. So men came together to build the tower. But God, from his vantage point, looked with irony on their puny tower and scrambled their language. This scrambling of language can be seen as rectified at Pentecost.

Joseph too was in a position to restore the arrogance of man when his brothers came to him in Egypt. When they learned that he knew who they were, they were afraid that he might have them imprisoned or killed, but he told them that he was not in the place of God, and forgave and embraced them. Because we know that we are under God, that God is the author and director of the world, that God led Noah through the flood and put the rainbow in the sky, we can look forward to a new world, yet to emerge. The rainbow still shines in the dark places, we have a Father and the world is not mere chance, but God is moving the world to some goal, whatever tyrants and fools may arrive and pass on. Behind all there is God, in the shadows.

This is a series of sermons of great power and majesty, with great meaning and power for us today because they take these passages from Genesis as universal, as applying to us today in our life of faith, just as much as they did to the people who wrote them, and just as much as they will as long as man remains man in the way he has been since Adam and Eve.