

The Worldview Of Genesis 1-11

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It is common knowledge, of course, that the “history of the Jews” begins with the account of the call to Abram in Genesis 12.

Genesis 1-11, containing the creation account, the narrative of the fall, the story of the spread of civilization, the flood, and the subsequent accounts (including the ‘generations’ with the many genealogies) culminates with the story of the building of the Tower of Babel, the resultant confusion of the tongues and the generations of Seth from which lineage Abram comes. Thus it is introductory to the account with which the author is most interested, serving basically as a fundamental “frame of reference,” a “universal history,” a preparation, so to speak, for the “holy history” that begins with chapter 12.

The worldview set forth in these chapters underlies, in turn, the rest of the Jewish/Christian understandings about how things either were intended to or do in fact function in this world. Thus it establishes both the setting for God’s reign over history and also the need for God’s saving presence within that history.

The Apostolic Creed encapsules this whole worldview in one short phrase: “I believe in God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth.” It is confessed with such ease. . . almost as a “tip of the hat” to the One from whom all things have come and to whom all things go! But what a huge confession is packed into these few words!

It is our purpose here to let Genesis 1-11 speak to this confession. . . or, better put, to let Genesis 1-11 speak out of this confession (for, in a very real sense of the term, this section is a basic confession of faith about the world within which the people of God live and move and have their being). . . so that the confessor can find not only the many implications of this article of the creed for those of ancient times, but also the implications for us who live in the West of the late twentieth century. And not least of all for us who work in campus ministry, this “credal statement” establishes some very basic understandings for students and members of the academic communities within which we work.

It is important to review these fundamental understandings from time to time, for they are more and more being called into question on a variety of levels in the unfolding world of the late twentieth century after having been the basic and unquestioned presuppositions of the Judeo/Christian heritage century after century for the better part of at least six millennia. If we understand the Holy Scriptures to be our fundamental source of self-understanding we need to be highly conscious of what it was that the author of Genesis 1-11 was trying to communicate to those who serve the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob throughout the ages lest we too readily give away that which our forebears have considered basic to understanding the world in which we live and our human place in it.

The Establishment Of Essential Relationships Within The World

The Relationship between God and Nature

Genesis 1 is emphatic about establishing the fundamental truth that God is separate from all nature. God is the origin of all things and beings in the natural world and therefore the One who controls the entire world of nature, but neither nature nor the things contained therein are gods.

Inasmuch as we are so saturated with this thinking in the modern world of the West this fundamental emphasis is not always evident, but the world of the holy writer’s time was filled with nature religions and fertility cults and there was a tremendous awe in general before the natural forces holding so much power over the earth’s inhabitants. If the sun threatens the community, the sun god needs to be placated. If the rain threatens. . . or the

wind or the lightning or any other such natural power. . . then the community had to deal with that/those gods in whatever way(s) that could be contrived.

Over against this understanding of nature as either the direct manifestation or the abode of the gods, Genesis 1 thunders with majesty that all things were made by God and stand under God for divine service. The *things of nature*, whether heavenly bodies far away or water and wind near at hand, all originate with God and are, therefore, not to be confused with God. Any such confusion is the source of serious idolatry. This truth is taught so subtly but so really that one almost misses it in a day when such confusion is not as commonplace. But note, e.g., how the writer, after the rather awesome pause in the narrative describing the making of “the greater light to rule the day” and “the lesser light to rule the night,” sweeps away the whole astrological enterprise with the simple ‘phrase,”He made the stars also.” In what seems almost a contemptuous or at least ironic “afterthought” the writer destroys all concepts of the heavens ruling the affairs of humans who inhabit the earth. These heavenly bodies are, to be sure, the servants of the Creator, for they shall be “for signs and for seasons and for days and years,” but they shall not and cannot control the creation!

In such simple but firm and emphatic ways the writer “runs through” the whole creation, placing it at the disposal of the Creator while separating it cleanly and clearly from the Creator by whom it was made.

Another basic and fundamental understanding carried by Israel as part of its elementary world-view is established here at the same time: the earth and all material things are good! Evil and sin do not reside within the material creation, for all this comes from the hand of a God who is good and all this serves the goodness of God. The material world is not, as in some mythic stories in religious thought around Israel, contaminated by the very stuff from which it is made nor from the actions by which it came into existence. There was, in fact, no pre-existent “stuff” that gave these material things birth. The Word of the Lord alone called them into being and the hand of the Lord shaped them, and that Word and hand of God was good. Therefore, while one must by no means idolize the material creation one must also respect it since it came forth as something good to serve God. This is echoed over and over as in a liturgical refrain at the end of each creative day. “And God saw that it was good,” culminating in a final viewing of the completed project when God pronounces it all “very good.” The creation as such is good, uncontaminated when coming from the creative hand.

In this way the first two fundamental views of the world are laid bare in the account of creation found in Genesis 1: 1-2:3: (1) created things come from the hand of God and are designed to serve the Creator, not be confused with Him, and (2)- all creation is essentially good, so evil must therefore arise from some place other than the creation as such.

The Relationship Between Humans and Nature

Three more fundamental points emerge from the very narrative itself to give further shape and form to Israel’s worldview.

The first one is contained in embryonic form in the first chapter already when we are told that humans were made at the same time that the earth brought forth all other living creatures (1:24-31). But the point is emphatically made in the second chapter when we are told that before any living thing had yet sprung up on the earth and only a mist watered the ground “the Lord God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being.” (2:7) In no uncertain terms the human creation is associated with “the dust of the ground” just as the earth had brought forth all other living creatures according to their kinds (1:24). Humans are not angelic beings descended from the heavens, but they are part of the structures of the earth, essential parts of the natural world, participating in the “animal life” of this earth. On that level the humans are part and parcel of the material world created by God, equally good and equally servants with all the rest of creation.

But a second great truth coexists with the first one: While humans are part and parcel of the natural world, bound to that world in all kinds of ways, there is still something “set apart” about both their being and their role on this earth. Nothing less than “the breath of life” coming directly from the Creator enlivened that dust from which God formed humans. These humans bore the very “image of God,” we are told in the first chapter, and that gives them a special status since they were, so to speak, directly descended from God although living on the earth as the immediate representatives of the divine presence. None of the rest of creation could claim this kind of unique relationship to the Creator even though the rest of creation, too was “good.” This is signified by the placement of the humans in the garden of perfection “to till it and keep it.” Even the perfection of the first made garden from God’s hand needed the continuing “intervention” of God’s representative creature in order to receive necessary care. Nor has that need for the human hand in the care of this earth changed in our day. It has, in fact, only been magnified as humans have all too often become ravagers of the natural world rather than keepers of it. ¹⁷his fundamental truth establishes the human hand as a caretaker, a “lover” of the earth representing God, the Creator and Preserver of the earth, and it forces us away from understanding ourselves merely as “users,” careless devastators of that which God has placed on the earth as signs of divine love and care. Here is both the motive for and possibility of assuming responsible stewardship of the earth with all its resources.

The third great truth is now also introduced: an estrangement between God and the humans who first came from the divine hand has deeply disturbed the whole of what had been a perfect creation. Once that initial relationship between God and those who were to be the living representatives of the divine presence was ruptured, everything else was disturbed at the same time. Now humans were left with a world remade by their own hand. It was hardly recognizable any more for what it was meant to be. And, in fact, God was ‘frustrating’ the whole world, so to speak, in order to make it plain that disobedience to God has far-reaching effects. The hard new reality is now set before the primal pair: “I will greatly multiply your pain in childbearing ... Cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it.... thorns and thistles it shall bring forth to you... in the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust and to dust you shall return.” In this estranged situation the human origins from the dust shall be accentuated by returning to it. ¹⁷hey have now placed themselves squarely into partnership with the world by essentially ratifying its fruits over above the expressed will of God. The humans have now grounded themselves in the dust from which they came by showing preference for the forbidden fruit over against obedience to the divine command and joyful delight in serving God by exercising a godly stewardship over the creation.

Here one sees the essential problem: the earth is alienated from its Creator. Evil is ripping and tearing at what should be a natural harmony within creation as it was originally intended by the Creator. The human is at one and the same time both noble and fallen, the highest of creation and a broken creature concurrently. God desires to restore the nobility of humankind and humans seem determined to stop God from doing that!

The Relationship Between Humans and God

It becomes obvious through the telling of the creation stories in chapters one and two that the human enterprise was intended to be the pinnacle of God’s creative activity. God delights in all creation, having authored the earth and all that is on/in/around it from the heavens above the earth to the waters under the earth and all that populates the surface of the earth. Yet the earth is found to be “incomplete” (even though good) without the divine representative known as “adam,” a human presence established by and for God to hold a special place in this creation. The human existence is designed to “mirror” God, to bear “the image of God,” to have a place on earth that will represent God’s finest intentions and activity.

It is equally obvious simply from everyday existence even if one did not have the narrative of Genesis 3 (which narrative certainly secures the observation!) that the divine potential has been turned back in on those whom God has created. In seeing God’s “mirror image” in themselves, humans have over-estimated themselves and have taken themselves far too seriously! ¹⁷hey have made themselves master over the garden rather than

servants in it! They have discarded the rather simple instructions given by the Owner of the garden concerning its care and upkeep and have made their own manual of instructions by which they live. They have heard the Word of the Lord and disregarded it, living as though it made no real difference in or for life. In fact, the word of an alien has superseded the Word of the Lord and the humans have heeded it rather than the Word of the Creator and then they have gone on to multiply their own words endlessly in excuse, self-justification and continued rebellion as though their own words were greater and more significant than the Word that had brought the whole of creation into being! They have thereby made their own five count more than the One whose life dwelled within them and through whom alone they have lived and moved and had their being.

The relationship between the human inhabitants of planet earth and the Creator of all things is, therefore, a strangely paradoxical one in which the creatures need the Creator's blessing for everything related to their existence while at the same time they go about life as though they were in charge of their own affairs without any real need to heed the Word of their Creator. Humans often speak of loving God, but the love of humans for God all too often becomes a manipulative one seeking to wrench from the hand of God such things as they perceive necessary or good for their own welfare and happiness by using "wheedling" or "bargaining" as a substitute for love. On the other hand we read from time to time of how the Creator "repents" that He ever made this bunch of recalcitrant creatures, although at other times He chases after them with a passion that knows no bounds!

It is quite plain that the bottom line of the accounts reads like this: the basic instinct for humans is to turn away from God, to seek their own ways, to pay God obeisance only when it seems strategically necessary and to disregard and to wilfully and flauntingly disobey God when the divine will happens to contradict or stand in the way of their human will. The divine instinct, however, is to love and stand by the creation, for if it were anything other than that the world would long ago have disappeared under God's hand of judgment. The flood becomes the obvious statement of this as the narrative speaks both about God's "repenting" of having made these humans (6:1-7) while at the same time the destructive forces of water do not totally eradicate human life since God continues to treasure the creation too much to do away with it entirely (6:11-22). The same account speaks about both the human depravity of inward-turning, serving only its own purposes (6:1-7), and the possibility of the divine image still finding its way through this corruption of the original intention (6:8-10, 18, 22).

This is all unfolded through the early stories in Genesis as this rupture between the humans and God is tied to the disruptions in nature. What was meant to be between God and humans was not sustained and when the intended partnership came apart at the seams all nature suffered with the breakdown. This understanding is crucial for any real understanding of the world as we experience it, for the truth of human existence is wholistic.

The Relationship Between Humans and Humans

This distressed state of affairs between humans and God is, in turn, immediately mirrored in the tormented way humans interact with one another. Broken relationships on the divine level always show up in broken relationships on the human level.

This is clearly not the way things were meant to be, of course, for in the first two chapters one finds the foundations established for understanding the human as a social creature, the constitution of family as the fundamental social unit and, by extrapolation at least, the basis for community, friendship, and the intended linking of humans one to another.

This accent is made in the second chapter more than in the first where the simple sentence, "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them," suffices, going on from there to speak mainly of the human dependency on and stewardship of the earth. The second chapter, however, elaborates on this accent considerably as we are told that "the Lord God formed man from the dust

of the ground” and placed him in the “garden in Eden.” Then God “made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food. . .,” but recognized immediately that “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him.” Thus the animals were formed to give man companionship, but having examined them all for the capacity to fill this void in his life (“The man gave names to all. . .”), the man is still unfulfilled. ‘The creation, good as it is, is still incomplete.

Therefore the woman is brought forth and, in an exclamation expressing unbounded enthusiasm for what God has now done, the man cries out, “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man.” What was still missing in the goodness of the Garden was the social dimension, the companionship necessary to “humanize” the divine creation! It is in society, in the companionship of others like themselves, that humans ultimately were to find their place in God’s creation. Here we discover foundational truths for the whole of Israel’s self-understanding and for its understanding of how the world is to function.

The complementarity of the man and woman is also apparent in the account, for the woman is to “fill in” that which was missing in the man as the man “fills in” that which the woman could not have alone!

This complementarity within the social sphere of the human world is the basis for marriage. In marriage the basic bonding in this newly founded human culture is created. It is a foundational statement, this understanding that “a man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves to his wife, and they become one flesh,” for it is a way of establishing how to most intimately flesh out the vision that God has for the way humans are to relate to other humans.

Not as though all people must marry, for clearly parts of society are built on relationships other than marriage. . . on friendships of men to men, women to women, women to men, etc., or on more casual acquaintances or on familial ties of extended families, and so on. Some, like Jesus, will never marry. But the complementarity of woman and man is grounded in this narrative as foundational for society in a larger way as well as in a narrower way.

Society is now “in place” as human relationships are structured into the narrative itself. A “vision” is set forth of what can be when God’s creation functions with God present among them “walking in the garden.”

Unfortunately this vision is soon thrown into a furor as sin floods into the world. Where sin is, these relationships break down and society becomes tormented.

This understanding is made plain as the man and woman turn on one another in an effort at saving their own faces. They manage to hold their relationship together momentarily (as long as both are sharing the same sin, they hide together peaceably enough), but once they are discovered they set about their justification in perfect human style even before anyone can teach them how humans act! Adam took the first shot: “The woman whom Thou gavest to be with me . . . And since the man had what seemed something of an air-tight case on that level the woman could not respond well in counter-accusation (although had we written the story we would undoubtedly have had the woman responding, “Well, nobody forced you to eat that fruit, Bozo! You’re as much to blame as me!” But, fortunately, we did not write the narrative, so we must let the story speak as it stands!) so she immediately placed blame on the creature. “The serpent beguiled me, and I ate.” The serpent-creature had pointed to the beauty of a perfect tree and human eyes were that easily turned from God to the creation; human ears heard the word of the creature and the human heart that easily forgot and/or rebelled against the Word of the Creator; and with relative ease the human creatureliness established itself as the arbiter over the Word of the One whose mighty Word had brought all things into being and had established the rule and order of the garden, declaring by the deed that the Word of God was a lesser word and therefore a subservient word to the word of the creature.

And the world stands silent. The serpent says nothing. The trees are hushed. ALL creation waits with bated breath, unable to imagine how a creature would speak so brazenly against the Word that had brought all of this perfection and beauty into existence. The world's future hangs in the balance. What will God say in the face of this incredible development?

The Word of the Lord now spoken is understandably a very hard word, but the first glimmer of grace emerges out of this moment also. Though the couple is now clearly deathbound and deprived of the glories of the garden, they still have an opportunity to care for the earth... and they need each other to fulfill their responsibilities. God makes them garments of skins to replace their flimsy and temporary aprons of fig leaves, for this state of brokenness and tension-filled reunion is not merely a short-term state of affairs. The woman is named "the mother of all living" as they mutually recognize that only by caring for each other will there be a human future on earth at all.

Their spirits run high with the birth of a child and in exaltation they hopefully name the child Cain because, as Eve says so happily, "I have gotten a man with the help of the Lord." They anticipate a new start . . . perhaps even a repair of the poor start from which the mother and father now suffer. Instead, of course, the "new hope" becomes the fulfillment of the old worst fears as Cain becomes the first murderer. Again God tries to warn him off the course he has set for himself, but to no avail. Again, true to humanity, Cain tries to avoid the divine question and denies any knowledge of his brother. But again, true to the divine resolution Cain is cornered, forced into confession and confronted by God with a scathing justice ... while yet marvelously graced with a mark that will protect him from vengeance seekers.

Cain and Abel are signs of what it will always be like in a society where the inter-human activity is at best in a delicate balance and at worst in a destructive imbalance. Cities can be built and civilizations can arise out of those cities (4:17-22) because of the marvelously creative human ingenuity, but the sad fact is that out of the most civilized settings will continue to arise the most arrogant forms of human exchange (4:23,24).

The Ebb And Flow Of Human History

The combination of relationships which we have been examining now becomes the established underpinning to the unfolding of human history as it is now described for us. This is how Israel understands the world to "work," and establishes the matrix within which it is called into existence and gives it a sense of purpose as to why God called it into being - what God hoped to do in establishing a "chosen people."

An ebb and flow of God's grace and human arrogance make the ebb and flow of this human chronicle. Out of all the stories that could be told we hear about the second "new start" with the birth of Seth and his son Enosh. We are told that "at that time men began to call upon the name of the Lord." (4:26) So out of the ruins of the Cain and Abel story there emerges the high hope of the building of cities and the establishment of civilization by Cain and his descendants, a sign that creativity and initiative is not particularly stifled by the sinfulness of humans. But with the rise of the city there also rises one whose boasts of evil deeds puts even Cain to shame. But hope continues as the "generations of Adam" are recounted with yet another emphatic underlining of the human potential: "When God created man, He made him in the likeness of God. Male and female He created them, and He blessed them and named them Man when they were created. . ." (5:1,2) And from the loins of Adam comes Lamech who bears Noah, saying, "Out of the ground which the Lord has cursed this one shall bring us relief from our work and from the toil of the our hands." (5:29)

The flood account reads like a second creation account. The waters cover the face of the deep, they are parted, dry land appears, the animals are distributed again across the face of the earth and the humans are restored to the place in the creation originally assigned to them in almost identical words to those narrating the first creation.

And Noah thanks God with praise and thanksgiving, sacrifice and ...

Sin! Hardly has God promised to never again unleash the powers of nature in that form again as a new covenant is sealed between God and humans (even though it is still recognized that “the imagination of man’s heart is evil from his youth” [8:21]) when the debacle of Noah’s drunkenness and the discovery of his naked father by Ham sets off a new round of disgraceful behavior. Shem and Japheth try to hold it at bay, but the “new order” looks much like the “old order” as Noah thunders a curse upon Canaan (even though Ham is said to be the culprit!) that sets up master/slave relationships that will dehumanize segments of society in the interests of serving other segments of society.

And so life goes on. ‘Me ebb and flow of human arrogance and divine justice tempered by divine grace moves through the annals of history.

The generations of Noah’s sons are enumerated as the world is re-populated and re-established as a “rainbow coalition.” But now the individual arrogance of Cain becomes the communal arrogance of an earth with one language desirous of raising a monument to its own glory.

The story of the tower of Babel epitomizes everything that roots the earth in its own perversion. No longer do they stand at a tree, but at the shrine of their own technology. “Let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly.” They admire the fruit of their own humanbuilt tree and they have no hesitancy about eating that fruit. “Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.” Again the Lord must seek out the humans in their re-shaped garden. With biting irony we are told that the Lord in the heavens looked down upon this great tower “with its top in the heavens” . . . and He cannot quite make out what it is. One can almost envision God squinting in an attempt at determining what all the hustle and bustle is about down there on earth. Finally, in order to see this great monument to human capability God must “come down to see the city and the tower, which the sons of men had built.” And God finds that the sin of which Adam and Eve had once been at least ashamed is no longer even a little bit shameful to these “modern-day builders of the world.” So it is determined that they must be scattered across the face of the earth through a confusion of tongues. But once again grace is sprinkled out into the judgment, for there is not a great devastation that comes upon these rebels. The people must be saved from themselves, for there is no telling what they will do if left to themselves. So God’s grace preserves them from their own devices and they must “leave off building the city” (11: 1-9) even though they remain free to go elsewhere and to continue the use of that marvelous creativity that they were using in an idolatrous fashion at Babel.

One senses, though, that these kinds of stories could go on and on, for the cycle of human history is forever playing variations on these themes of human pride and divine grace, on human self-serving and divine self-giving. That is what Israel and the church recognize and confesses through this “universal history” which we have been reviewing. Foundational understandings have been established about the way the world was meant to be and basic recognitions have been made about the way the world is . . . and the way the world will continue to be so long as it stands on its own. Clearly the high intentions can never be realized.

So a new course is laid out. From the descendants of Shem came a man who would father a new nation, a nation to be set among the nations, establishing among the nations a realization of what it means to be the people of God. They would be a people who know sin and yet can, by the grace of God, somehow transcend the idolatry that lies at the root of sin. They would be, like the rest of the world, exiles from Eden, but they would also be people who know the way home because God walks with them. They would be a people in whom swirls all the human passions that the rest of the world knows and feels, but they would be a Cain marked for protection, a people whose worst moment could not drive them away from the still greater swirl of God’s caring protection. They would live, like Noah, in the midst of a degenerating and degenerate world and be borne by the grace of God above the destructive forces sucking and pulling at all the other nations. They would stand in the midst of nations whose tongues separate them and speak with the tongue of the Lord, showing forth the praises of the

Creator/Protector, Redeemer and Counselor so that all the world might have a sign, an indicator of how God functions in this world created for the purpose of housing divine activity in a material form. Israel would be set like a city on a hill so that all the world could see the God who rules over all people through her.

Now the Lord said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” (Genesis 12:1-3)