

The Book of Genesis

Introduction

The Book of Genesis often confronts us as an antiquated work of literature containing stories of questionable value for our sophisticated civilized world. And yet, because it forms a part of the Bible, we feel that it should say something to us, something about God that transcends time and place. Part of the problem in finding meaning in the Book of Genesis is the vast distance between the world that produced Genesis—a pre-scientific, Eastern world—and our own world, characterized by a scientific, Western approach to reality. To understand the Book of Genesis, we must enter its world, determine what it meant in its time, and only then can we venture to say what it means now for our world.

In this commentary we will interpret the Book of Genesis against its historical background. To do so, we will draw upon the discoveries of archaeology and the critical tools of literary analysis. Before turning to the biblical text itself, however, we want to discuss how the Book of Genesis came to be written and the forms in which it is written.

The formation of the Book of Genesis

The Book of Genesis is the story of the pre-history of Israel. Israel became a nation only when it came to occupy and rule the land of Canaan. This nation came to identify itself as a federation of tribes in covenant with a God who had brought their ancestors out of Egypt and led them to the Promised Land. The Exodus was interpreted as the moment of birth for this nation. But as these tribes consolidated their traditions that spoke of the actions of God in their past, they began to realize that even before the time of the Exodus, God was at work leading them to that moment. The Exodus came to be viewed as the culmination of a process that started when God first called Abraham and promised to make him a great nation.

Eventually Israel began to view its own history in the context of world history, and joined to the story of its origins the story of the beginnings of the universe and the history of humanity in the primeval period. It is important to recognize that this process took centuries. Stories were told and retold, adapted and reinterpreted. They were given a new context and acquired new meaning. These stories grew and developed beyond their original telling until they found their way into the larger story of Israel's relationship to God. The Book of Genesis bears the imprint of this long process of growth.

Scholars began to pay close attention to the formation of the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Bible) when it was recognized that there were two different Hebrew names given to the Deity in the Book of Genesis, namely, Yahweh, the personal name of Israel's God, and Elohim, translated simply God. The presence of these different names in various stories coincided with differences in style and vocabulary in the stories in which they appeared. Contradictions within stories (for example, compare Gen 6:19 with 7:2), which had long puzzled scholars, were resolved when these stories were divided, on the basis of the use of the divine name, into what were originally two independent traditions or sources. Further support for this theory about two or more separate traditions is evident in the occurrence of two, and sometimes three, versions of the same story (Gen 12:10-20/ Gen 20/Gen 26:1-11).

By careful analysis of the data, scholars were led to conclude that there were at least four different authors who contributed to the formation of the Pentateuch. These are identified as the Yahwist (J), Elohist (E), Priestly (P), and Deuteronomic (D) authors, also referred to as "sources" or "traditions." Of these four authors, only the Yahwist, Elohist, and Priestly are to be found in the Book of Genesis; thus we will omit from our discussion the Deuteronomic source.

The YAHWIST source (J) is so called because it uses the name Yahweh (spelled *Jahweh* in German, hence the abbreviation J) for the Deity. The Yahwist is the earliest of the sources, originating in the tenth century B. c., the age of David and Solomon. The stories of the Yahwist tradition are characterized by a vivid folk-tale style and a colorful portrayal of characters, setting the Yahwist apart as an author of great skill. The author allows the actions of the characters to speak for themselves and rarely passes moral judgment on their behavior. The anthropomorphic presentation of God in the Yahwist tradition gives a very personal character to the Deity. For the Yahwist, God is actively involved in the history of humanity and, in particular, in Israel's history. The Yahwist begins the story with creation (Gen 2:4b-31), presenting the history of humanity as the background against which Yahweh calls Abraham and extends to him a promise that is fully realized only by the Exodus and the conquest of Canaan. The theme of promise and fulfillment is dominant in the Yahwist's presentation of patriarchal history.

The ELOHIST (E) uses the name Elohim for Israel's God until Exod 3:14, where the name Yahweh is revealed to Moses. This source is generally dated in the ninth century B. c. and is believed to have originated in the northern kingdom. The Elohist source has been so intertwined with the Yahwist that it is difficult to separate the two sources in all instances. Since the Elohist source has been subordinated to the Yahwist, what remains of the Elohist

narrative is often incomplete. Where we do find a complete story, for example Gen 22, the Elohist is seen to be an author of some skill. The Elohist resorts to dreams and angels as means of divine communication rather than allowing direct contact with the Deity, as does the Yahwist. The Elohist is most noted for his moral sensitivity, which is evident in his attempts to justify, explain, or gloss over the misdeeds of Israel's ancestors. The Elohist tells his story in the patriarchal period, and can be found for the first time in Gen 20, though perhaps in fragmentary form as early as Gen 15.

The PRIESTLY author (P) also prefers the name Elohim for the Deity until the time of Moses (Exod 6). Though the actual writing of the Priestly work is to be dated during the period of the Babylonian Exile (ca. 550 B. c.), the sources used by this author come from a much earlier period. The Priestly style tends to be repetitive, and his stories are rigidly structured, giving a very solemn tone to his work. The Priestly author preserves the transcendent character of God by avoiding anthropomorphisms in his portrayal of the Deity. The Book of Genesis opens with the Priestly account of creation. This author is responsible for the genealogies that form the framework of the Book of Genesis. The chronological format imposed on the Pentateuch

also derives from the Priestly author.

It is generally held that the Priestly author is responsible for the final editing of the Book of Genesis. It has been theorized that the Priestly tradition incorporates the earlier Yahwist and Elohist narratives. However, there is some evidence to suggest that a later redactor, or editor, actually combined the Yahwist, Elohist, and Priestly writings. This commentary will accept the presence of these three sources in the Book of Genesis and will often refer to the final form or context of a story. Whether that final form or context comes from the Priestly author or a later redactor will be left an open question.

Forms in the Book of Genesis

In interpreting the Book of Genesis, we cannot ignore the forms in which it is written. Interpretation rests upon form. If we hear a story that begins "once upon a time," we have no difficulty in recognizing that the story is a fairy tale; we would never mistake it for history, because we know its form. But the forms of the Book of Genesis are no longer common knowledge. Scholars in this past century have delineated and identified the forms in the Book of Genesis. Since this commentary is built upon their work, it is important to "rediscover" the forms in the Book of Genesis.

Narrative is the primary literary classification that we find in the Book of Genesis. A narrative is simply a story. To refer to the form of the Book of Genesis as story is not to devalue the book nor to minimize in any way

its theological significance. Indeed, Israel's most distinctive way of speaking of the Deity is to tell the story of God's acts in its life as a nation.

The dominant form of narrative in the Book of Genesis is the saga. Sagas are stories that have a basis in fact, but as the stories are transmitted, they are expanded and enhanced by non-factual elements. Sagas originate at an oral level combining tradition and imagination. It is not unusual to find reported in a saga the direct intervention of God in human affairs. In a saga the incredible is simply part of the flow of events. Sagas may explain why something is the way it is (etiological sagas), why something or someone has a particular name (etymological sagas), why tribes relate as they do (ethnological sagas), why certain places or actions are considered holy (cult sagas), or why a particular locale has unique characteristics (geological sagas). All of these types of sagas are evident in the Book of Genesis.

In the patriarchal sagas of Genesis, the world is seen in terms of families. Jacob is no longer Jacob, he is Israel; Esau is the father of the Edomites. The history of the relationship between these tribes becomes the story of the relationship between these brothers. The patriarchs are characters larger than life. They no longer represent historical persons but become the embodiment of the characteristics of their tribes.

Many individual sagas have been joined together to form the story of the patriarchs. These stories have become a part of a larger context, and so their original meaning is changed. As we work our way through the stories, we will pay particular attention to the levels of meaning acquired by a story as it became a part of the Book of Genesis.

Scholars continue to debate about the presence of myth in the Book of Genesis. Whether or not they find myth in Genesis depends upon their definition of myth. The common definition of myth as a story about gods and goddesses excludes myth from the Bible, because Israel accepts only Yahweh as its God. But myth need not be so narrowly defined. Myth is a way of thinking about reality. What distinguishes myth is that it speaks of reality symbolically in terms of interacting divine powers in the primal era. These powers continue to affect our world through the cult.

The dominant form of expression among Israel's neighbors was myth. It was inevitable that Israel would appropriate the mythological motifs of the ancient Near East. However, Israel did not simply absorb the mythology of the nations that surrounded it; their mythology was changed and adapted to suit Israel's distinctive view of God and the world. We will find, particularly in Gen 1-11, mythological motifs that Israel borrowed but transformed. There are other forms in the Book of Genesis, but we will attend to these in context in the commentary itself.

The Book of Genesis

Text and Commentary

THE PRIMEVAL HISTORY

1 First Story of Creation. ¹In the beginning, when God created the

heavens and the earth, ²the earth was a formless wasteland, and darkness covered the abyss, while a mighty wind swept over the waters.

THE PRIMEVAL HISTORY

Gen 1:1-11:27

The first eleven chapters of the Book of Genesis are designated "primeval history" because they treat of the history of humanity, and not specifically of the history of Israel. The universalist perspective of the Yahwist is seen in the placement of Israel's history within the larger context of human history, beginning with creation. The Yahwist narrative is now introduced and supplemented by the traditions of the Priestly author, but the overriding theme is still that of the Yahwist: humanity, because of sin, moves further and further from its God.

THE PRIESTLY CREATION ACCOUNT

Gen 1:1-2:4a

The Book of Genesis opens with a highly structured, hymn like account of creation by the Priestly author. Though there are similarities between this account and the Babylonian creation account, the *Enuma Elish*, the Priestly author has reinterpreted and rewritten the ancient myth to reflect Israel's distinctive theology. In contrast to the *Enuma Elish*, creation does not result from conflict. There is no war between the gods, there is nothing that opposes God. Instead, we are informed, in a carefully ordered sequence, that God creates the world solely by the power of the divine word.

1:1-25 The creation of the world. The opening verse identifies God as the main actor, and creation as the result of God's action. In addition, the opening verse tells us that prior to God's creative act the world was a formless

Then God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. God saw how good the light was. God then separated the light from the darkness. God called the light "day," and the darkness he called "night." Thus evening came, and morning followed—the first day.
 Then God said, "Let there be a dome in the middle of the waters, to separate one body of water from the other." And

so it happened: God made the dome, and it separated the water above the dome from the water below it. God called the dome "the sky." Evening came, and morning followed—the second day.
 Then God said, "Let the water under the sky be gathered into a single basin, so that the dry land may appear." And so it happened: the water under the sky was gathered into its basin, and the dry

land appeared. God called the dry land "the earth," and the basin of the water he called "the sea." God saw how good it was. Then God said, "Let the earth bring forth vegetation: every kind of plant that bears seed and every kind of fruit tree on earth that bears fruit with its seed in it." And so it happened: the

earth brought forth every kind of plant that bears seed and every kind of fruit tree on earth that bears fruit with its seed in it. God saw how good it was. Evening came, and morning followed—the third day.
 Then God said: "Let there be lights in the dome of the sky, to separate day

mass, existing as a watery chaos. This description of the world is in agreement with the mythology of the ancient Near East. Notice that darkness exists—it is not created by God. The origin of darkness, which symbolized evil and terror in the ancient world, is left in mystery. The abyss was the primordial ocean, which had to be "harnessed" for creation to occur. Upon this watery chaos the wind of God begins to act. The Hebrew text literally reads "wind of God," not "mighty wind" as in the text above (v. 2). While the translation "mighty wind" captures some of the sense of the original, it fails to take account of the fact that God is the source of this wind.

The Priestly account of creation is characterized by repetition. By using a framework that remains more or less constant for each day of creation, the author achieves a maximum of repetition, with enough variation to keep the account moving forward at a rhythmic pace. This rhythm gives the account its hymnlike quality. A tone of solemnity pervades the entire creation account. The repeated framework is as follows:

1. *Announcement*: "And God said."
2. *Command*: "Let there be. . ."
3. *Report*: "And it was so. . ."
4. *Evaluation*: "And God saw that it was good."
5. *Temporal framework*: "It was evening, it was morning."

In addition to this structural pattern, the author correlates the acts of creation of the last three days with those of the first three days.

<i>Day 1</i> Light	<i>Day 4</i> Heavenly lights
<i>Day 2</i> Sky, separating the upper and lower waters	<i>Day 5</i> Birds and fish
<i>Day 3</i> Earth and vegetation	<i>Day 6</i> Land animals and humanity

The creation of light on the first day is correlated with what gives light on the fourth day. Correspondingly, the sky, which separates the upper waters from the lower waters, becomes the habitat of the birds, whereas the lower waters are filled with fish. Animals and humanity dwell on the earth and

eat its vegetation. This highly schematized picture accentuates the orderliness of creation. Nothing is left to chance or whim, but all is well organized and proceeds as planned by the Creator.

The first act of creation is light, even though that which gives light, the sun and the moon, are not created until the fourth day. The author is not concerned with scientific fact but with an ordered universe, and light is necessary in order to see. The author may also be forced to put light first because in the *Enuma Elish* it is a property of the gods, emanating from them, and is mentioned first in that creation account. For our author, light is no longer a property of the gods but an element of the created world. God names the light "day," and the darkness "night" (v. 5). In ancient Israel, naming signified one's power over that which was named. God names the day and night because God above has authority over them. Likewise, God will name the sky and the earth and the sea. The light is seen as good, as is the entire created universe. A strong affirmation of the goodness of the created world pervades this account. The section concludes with the temporal framework, in which evening is mentioned first, then morning. This reflects ancient Israel's manner of keeping time—the day began at sunset.

God then creates the sky (vv. 6-8), which separates the waters above the heavens from the waters below. The cosmology envisioned by the author is one that he shared with the rest of the ancient Near Eastern world. Water surrounded the entire world and was held back only by the heavens above and the earth below. It threatened to overwhelm the earth, especially when storms and floods enveloped the earth. The sky was pictured as a bowl set upside down to keep the upper waters in place. This bowl had windows, allowing the rain, snow, or hail to reach the earth. The waters below appeared on earth as streams, lakes, and springs.

God puts limits on the expanse of water so that earth can appear. From the earth God calls forth vegetation that is able to reproduce itself ("with its seed in it," v. 11). Fruitfulness is not something dependent on the gods of fertility, but God has put the power of reproduction in vegetation itself. Here again the author shows a world that is not under the control of pagan deities.

from night. Let them mark the fixed times, the days and the years, and serve as luminaries in the dome of the sky, to shed light upon the earth. " And so it happened: ¹⁶God made the two great lights, the greater one to govern the day, and the lesser one to govern the night; and he made the stars. ¹⁷God set them in the dome of the sky, to shed

light upon the earth, ¹⁸to govern the day and the night, and to separate the light from the darkness. God saw how good it was. ¹⁹Evening came, and morning followed—the fourth day.

Then God said, "Let the water teem with an abundance of living creatures, and on the earth let birds fly beneath the dome of the sky. " And so it happened:

God created the great sea monsters and all kinds of swimming creatures with

Next God creates the lights and places them in the heavens. The author carefully avoids the terms "sun" and "moon," but uses instead the terms "greater light" and "lesser light" (v. 16). The sun and moon were considered deities in the ancient pagan world. By avoiding the use of these terms, the author is in effect saying, "See what other nations consider deities! They are nothing but a 'big light' and a 'little light' in the heavens. " The sun and the moon are simply elements of the created universe, not gods to be worshiped.

The sky separating the waters above from the waters below is filled with birds, and the waters below with fish. On the sixth day animals and humanity are created to inhabit the earth, which was created on the third day.

1:26-31 The creation of humanity. The whole creation account has been leading up to the creation of humanity. A habitat has been created in which humanity will dwell; time has been created as a measure by which humanity will govern its life. And finally when all is ready, man and woman are created. Since the Priestly author describes the creation of humanity in more detail than the previous creative acts, and since this act is the last in the series, the author is indicating that humanity is the high point of all creation. The special character of this creation is underscored by the fact that only humanity is described as being created in the "image and likeness" of God (v. 26).

There are three problematic expressions in this section that often cause confusion and misunderstanding. Who are the "us" in Gen 1:26? What does it mean to be created in the "image" of God? What kind of creature is this "man" created both male and female?

which the water teems, and all kinds of winged birds. God saw how good it was, and God blessed them, saying, "Be fertile, multiply, and fill the water of the seas; and let the birds multiply on the earth. " Evening came, and morning followed—the fifth day.

Then God said, "Let the earth bring forth all kinds of living creatures: cattle,

creeping things, and wild animals of all kinds. "And so it happened: ²⁵God made all kinds of wild animals, all kinds of cattle, and all kinds of creeping things of the earth. God saw how good it was. ²⁶Then God said: "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. Let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and the cattle, and over all the wild animals and all the creatures that crawl on the ground."

²⁷God created man in his image; in the divine image he created him; male and female he created them. ¹God 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 the living things that move on the earth. · God also said: "See, I give you every seed-bearing plant all over the earth and

The "us" in Gen 1:26 is not easily explained. Several theories have been advanced, but none is entirely satisfactory. Some scholars argue that the "us" is to be explained as an example of the "plural of majesty. " The plural of majesty accounts for the fact that in Hebrew the word for God (*Elohim*) is in the plural but is found with a singular verb, indicating that it is meant to be taken as a singular noun. It is supposed that because God is so great and powerful, the ancient Hebrews spoke of their Deity in the plural. For these scholars, the "us" in Gen 1:26 is an instance of this plural of majesty.

Since there is no other language that uses a plural of majesty, other scholars prefer to find in the use of "us" a remnant of pagan mythology. In ancient Near Eastern myths the high god creates humanity in consultation with the heavenly council. The heavenly council is composed of the lesser gods who surround the high god and act as advisors. This may well be in the background, but since the author has avoided other pagan overtones, one wonders why less care would be taken here.

More recently it has been argued that the "us" of Gen 1:26 is to be understood as a rhetorical device without much significance. It is something like saying "Let's do it" after one has debated with oneself over a course of action. Possibly the problem of the "us" in Gen 1:26 will never be solved, but each of these theories is at least plausible, if not entirely satisfactory.

In order to determine what kind of creature the human being is, it is essential that we understand what is meant by the term "image. " Often this has been taken to mean that humanity is endowed with a soul, and that the soul is in the image of God. This could not be further from the intent of the author of Gen 1. The view that the human person is composed of a body and a soul is a distinctly Greek idea; in fact, the Hebrew language does not even have a word for "soul. " In what way, then, does humanity "image" God? In the ancient world, "image" was used to refer to a statue of the king that was sent *to* the distant corners of the kingdom where the king could not be present in person. This "image" was to be the representative of the king in that area. If we apply this to Genesis, to be created in the image of God is to be God's representative on earth. This is underscored in the very next sentence of verse 26, in which humanity is given dominion over the earth. As God is ruler of the heavenly realm, so humanity, as God's representative, is ruler of the earthly realm. This is a very exalted view of humanity.

every tree that has seed-bearing fruit on it to be your food; ³⁰and to all the animals of the land, all the birds of the air, and all the living creatures that crawl on the ground, I give all the green plants for food. " And so it happened. ³¹God looked at everything he had made, and he found it very good. Evening came, and morning followed- the sixth day.

² Thus the heavens and the earth and their array were completed. Since ² on the seventh day God was finished with the work he had been doing, he rested on the seventh day from all the

work he had undertaken. ³So God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work he had done in creation.

•Such is the story of the heavens and the earth at their creation.

Second Story of Creation. At the time when the LORD God made the earth and the heaven s-⁵while as yet there was no field shrub on earth and no grass of the field had sprouted, for the LORD God had sent no rain upon the earth and there was no man to till the soil, ⁶but a stream was welling up out of the earth and was watering all the surface of the

The final problem in these verses arises more from the limitations of the English language than from the original Hebrew text. In Hebrew, *adam* generally means "humanity. " To refer to an individual male, Hebrew used another term. In Gen 1:26 the term is *adam*, and so the text can be translated, "God created humanity in his image;. . . male and female he created them. " Humanity is not created as some kind of androgynous being, but rather humanity consists of the male and the female. Together man and woman constitute humanity.

2:1-4a The hallowing of the sabbath. Sabbath rest is associated with the rest of God on the seventh day. In six days there have been eight separate acts of creation. The author has varied the framework noted above by placing two acts of creation on the third and sixth day, and is then able to maintain a six-day structure in spite of the fact that there are eight acts of creation. This is done to underscore the significance of the sabbath. The sabbath rest mandated in the commandments in the Book of Exodus (20:8) is here bound up with the very beginnings of the world ; it is tied to the created order.

CONCLUSION

The Priestly account of creation is a theological reflection on the world th. ¹¹ the author has experienced. It is a world wherein God is seen as a powerful being, able to create by merely speaking a word. God is seen as standing uul oide the universe that is called into being. The Deity transcends the created ordt•r. Humanity is seen as the high point of creation. The world in which hum. Inity lives has been organized by God, but as God's representative on I'Mih, humanity is to be sovereign over the world.

ground -⁷the LORD God formed man out of the clay of the ground and blew into his nostrils the breath of life, and so man became a living being.

•Then the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and he placed there the man whom he had formed. ⁹Out of the ground the LORD God made various

THE YAHWIST ACCOUNT OF CREATION AND SIN, AND THE PRIESTLY GENEALOGY OF ADAM

Gen 2:4b-5:32

Though the Yahwist account of creation follows upon the Priestly account, it is actually the earlier of the two accounts. It is written in the style of a folk tale, without the repetition and carefully delineated structure that characterizes the Priestly account. Creation is *formed* by Yahweh, not called into existence by the power of the divine word. The focus in this story is not on the creation of the world as such, but on the relationship of man and woman to each other and to the world.

2:4b-9 The creation of "the Human." In this creation account, what exists prior to God's creative act is not watery chaos, as in Gen 1, but rather desert. The earth is viewed as barren for two reasons: there is no water, and there is no one to till the soil. The background of this creation story is clearly the experience of the farmer, for whom water and the tilling of the soil are necessary in order to bring forth vegetation from the earth. Water aids creation, whereas in Gen 1 water had to be confined for creation to proceed.

The first thing formed by Yahweh is "the Human." This is not to be understood as an individual named Adam; rather, "the Human" is the whole of humanity. That the author views this original creature as a representative of undifferentiated humanity and not as an individual is clear from the use of the definite article "the" before "humanity" in the Hebrew text.

The human creature is made from the ground. In Hebrew, "human" and , "ground" are similar-sounding words (*'adam*, *'adamah*), and so bear a special relationship to each other. This play on words is characteristic of the Yahwist author. By using two similar-sounding words, the author is able to focus the attention of the reader on the relationship between the two words. The relationship between humanity and the ground is thus underscored. The human creature comes from the ground and so depends upon it for life.

Yahweh breathes life into "the Human" and it becomes a "living being" (v. 7). In the past this has been interpreted as the creation of the soul, but, as indicated above, the Hebrew language did not have a word for "soul. " "The Human" becomes a living being. Humanity lives because Yahweh's breath is in it; when Yahweh's breath leaves, it dies. Every breath of every

trees grow that were delightful to look at and good for food, with the tree of life in the middle of the garden and the tree of the knowledge of good and bad.

¹A river rises in Eden to water the garden; beyond there it divides and becomes four branches. ¹¹The name of the first is the Pishon; it is the one that

winds through the whole land of Havilah, where there is gold. The gold of that land is excellent; bdellium and lapis lazuli are also there. ¹³The name of the second river is the Cihon; it is the one that winds all through the land of Cush. ¹⁴The name of the third river is the Tigris; it is the one that flows east of

person depends directly upon Yahweh. It should be noted that the animals are also living beings (2:19). Humanity and animals are living, breathing creatures. Humanity and animals are to be distinguished from each other by the fact that Yahweh speaks to the human creature but not to the animals. In addition, the human creature names the animals, thus signify in humanity's control over the animal world.

Once the human creature is formed, Yahweh proceeds to create a place in which humanity will dwell. This is unlike Gen 1, where the habitat was created first, and only later were people created to live in it. Here Yahweh creates a garden (v.8), which resembles a park with trees, not a garden of plants and flowers. These park-like gardens were cultivated by great kings in the ancient Near East. They were a source of shade from the sun, the kind of place where a king could relax. This is Yahweh's garden, and Yahweh uses it in the cool of the evening to "relax."

The author mentions two trees that will function significantly in Gen 3, the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The tree of life appears again only at the end of Gen 3, and thus it can be seen to play a marginal role in the story. The tree of life was a symbol of immortality in ancient Near Eastern mythology; it plays the same role in this story. As long as the first couple are in the garden and have access to this tree, their life is not threatened. Once they are expelled from the garden, they become subject to death. The tree of the knowledge of good and evil, by contrast, plays an integral role in the story that follows, and we will consider its symbolism in the context of that story.

2:10-14 The four rivers. It is commonly recognized that these verses interrupt the story of the Yahwist. They contribute nothing to the action of the story. Verse 15 seems to be the continuation of verse 9, not of verses 10-14. Moreover, this insertion contradicts what was said earlier in the text about the location of Eden (v. 8). According to this passage, Eden is located in the north, and the four great rivers that surround the world flow from it. Only two of the rivers can be identified—the Tigris and the Euphrates. The Pishon and the Gihon cannot be identified with certainty, but they probably refer to rivers in the same general area as the Tigris and Euphrates. The

Asshur. The fourth river is the Euphrates.

The LORD God then took the man and settled him in the garden of Eden, to cultivate and care for it. The LORD God gave man this order: "You are free to eat from any of the trees of the garden except the tree of knowledge of good and bad. From that tree you shall not eat; the moment you eat from it you are surely doomed to die."

¹⁵The LORD God said: "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a

suitable partner for him." ¹⁹So the LORD God formed out of the ground various wild animals and various birds of the air, and he brought them to the man to see what he would call them; whatever the man called each of them would be its name. ²⁰The man gave names to all the cattle, all the birds of the air, and all the wild animals; but none proved to be the suitable partner for the man.

so the LORD God cast a deep sleep on the man, and while he was asleep, he took out one of his ribs and closed up its

purpose of this insertion seems to be to link the garden of Eden with a specific geographical area in an attempt to historicize the story.

2:15-17 The command. The human creature is placed in the garden and given the task of cultivating and taking care of it. This echoes ancient Near Eastern mythology, in which humanity is created to do the work of the gods. A command not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil is given, without any explanation for this prohibition. It is simply stated that Yahweh has created humanity and has placed certain limits upon human activity.

2:18-24 The creation of woman. The motive given by Yahweh for the creation of woman is that "It is not good for the human to be alone." While this aspect of the story has often been interpreted as a reference to the social nature of humanity, what is really intended by the author is to account for the marriage relationship, as the concluding verse of the story indicates (v. 24). We must bear in mind that in presenting that relationship the author is writing from the perspective of the tenth century B. C. and presents the woman from that viewpoint. A woman's position was one of support to her husband. She is, in the literal translation of the Hebrew text, a "helper fit for him." In the Old Testament, "helper" means one who gives support or strength, one who enables others to fulfill their destiny. Frequently in the Old Testament, it is actually God who is called "helper" (Deut 33:7; Ps 33:20; 70:6; etc.). No one would argue that God is subservient to anyone. The story is not about the essence of woman, but about her dignity in the institution of marriage. Woman is intended to be one in whom man finds support and strength.

In contrast to the Priestly account, creation does not appear as an organized, step-by-step process. Rather, one thing is made, then another, until God is satisfied with the results. Like the human creature, the animals are formed from the ground and become "living beings" (2:9—the phrase

place with flesh. ²²The LORD God then built up into a woman the rib that he had taken from the man. When he brought her to the man, ²³the man said:

This one, at last, is bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh;
This one shall be called woman.'

for out of 'her man' this one has been taken. "

That is why a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife, and the two of them become one body.

The man and his wife were both naked, yet they felt no shame.

"living beings" is curiously omitted in our text). The human creature and the animals share a common origin. They are distinguished from each other by the fact that the human creature names the animals, signifying authority over them. Moreover, as previously stated, Yahweh speaks to the human creature but does not address the animals.

Even though the human creatures and the animals are both living beings, the animals do not prove to be suitable as a "helper." A second time Yahweh attempts to form a suitable helper, and this time forms a woman from one of the ribs of "the Human," who is put into a "deep sleep" lest the act of creation be witnessed. The act of creation remains a divine mystery.

One of the most puzzling aspects of this passage is the fact that Yahweh forms the woman from a rib (v. 22). We have no parallels in ancient Near Eastern mythology, and what a rib may symbolize in the text is simply unknown. We do know that in the Sumerian language "rib" and "life" are the same word. The goddess of life is at the same time the "Lady of the Rib." It is interesting to note that at the conclusion of chapter 3 the man calls his wife "Eve," a form of the Hebrew word for "life," and recognizes that she will be the "mother of all the living" (3:20). The association of life and rib with woman may indicate that in the background of the story is something akin to the Sumerian wordplay.

When the woman is brought to the man (v. 23), he exclaims in poetic form that at last a suitable helper has been found. No longer is he alone.

There is a wordplay between the terms "man" and "woman" in Hebrew (*'ish, 'ishshah*) that highlights the special relationship between man and woman. Woman comes from man and so depends upon him. This is consistent with the position of woman in ancient Near Eastern society in the tenth century

B. c. This passage has often been used to substantiate the view that woman is inferior to man and subservient to him. This is certainly not the intent of the author. It is clear that woman is not inferior to man. Her mysterious creation by God from human substance underscores the common nature she shares with man and the bond that unites them. That she is his "helper" does not indicate subservience.

Verse 24 is clearly the conclusion of chapter 2 and shows that our story is an etiology, a story about the past that explains a present reality. This

3 The Fall of Man. ¹Now the serpent was the most cunning of all the animals that the LORD God had made. The serpent asked the woman, "Did God really tell you not to eat from any of the trees in the garden?" The woman answered the serpent: 'We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; lit is

story tells us why men and women are drawn to each other sexually and marry. The terms "leave" and "cleave" are covenant terms and suggest that marriage is here viewed as a covenantal relationship.

CONCLUSION

The Yahwist account of creation is much more local in scope than the Priestly account; it is concerned with the human relationship to the soil and the relationship between man and woman, not with the creation of a universe. Clearly drawn from an agricultural milieu, the story presents humanity as coming from the ground, and dependent upon the ground for life. In death humanity will return to the ground from which it came. Woman is the only suitable helper for man, since she is formed from human flesh. The attraction of the sexes and the institution of marriage are described as the natural destiny of man and woman, flowing from the way they were created. Yahweh, in turn, is not distant from creation but is directly involved in the act of creation and concerned about all creatures.

2:25-3:7 The sin of Adam and Eve. The final verse of chapter 2 is transitional and serves more to introduce the next story than to conclude the previous one. That man and woman are naked and yet feel no shame is more than a mere observation of their being undressed. As will be obvious later, their nakedness becomes a symbol of their relationship to God. At this time in the story, that relationship to God is still intact; thus nakedness does not cause shame. Only with the disruption of that relationship is their nakedness an embarrassment.

A new character is now introduced into the story—the serpent. This creature is characterized as being "cunning." This term carries connotations of craftiness and cleverness, and contrasts with the naiveté of the woman. In Hebrew, "cunning" (*'arum*) forms a wordplay with "naked" (*'arummim*). This wordplay underscores the fact that man and woman become aware of their nakedness because of the cunning of the serpent. It should be noted that nowhere in this text is the serpent identified as the devil; this identification does not come about until the first century s. c. (Wis 2:24; Enoch 69:6).

What, then, does the serpent represent? In Canaan the serpent was associated with the fertility cults. We know that these cults were a constant source of temptation to Israel, and, as indicated in the Old Testament, Israel

only about the fruit of the tree in the middle of the garden that God said, "You shall not eat it or even touch it, lest you die." ⁴but the serpent said to the

woman: 'You certainly will not die!'. God knows well that the moment you eat of it your eyes will be opened and you will be like gods who know

often succumbed to such temptation. The choice of a serpent to represent the tempter of humanity is the author's way of saying, "Don't get involved with serpents (that is, the fertility cults); they will only cause trouble, as they did for the first man and woman." It becomes a way of warning Israel to stay away from fertility cults.

The story of Gen 3 says nothing about the serpent's motives in tempting the man and the woman. Indeed, the source of evil itself is left a mystery in Gen 3. What the story does tell us is that the presence of evil in the world is due to humanity's decision to oppose God's command.

Many scholars have attempted to explain why the serpent engages the woman in conversation and not the man. Their answers range from interpreting woman as inherently weak, incurably curious, to viewing her as much stronger than man. If she can be made to sin, man will automatically follow. The text supports none of these views. It is clear that the author portrays both man and woman as listening to the serpent. She eats the fruit and gives it to the man "who is with her" (v. 6). The fact that woman is presented first can be explained as simply a literary device that keeps the story moving. The serpent is introduced first, then the woman, then the man. When God comes to the garden, the man is addressed first, then the woman, then the serpent. When God punishes them, the serpent is punished first, then the woman, then the man. This movement from serpent-woman-man, man-woman-serpent, serpent-woman-man maintains an even flow to the story and has no great significance beyond this fact. It is clear that the woman is included in God's command even though she is never the explicit recipient of that command (2:11, 17). And it is clear, as indicated above, that the man is with the woman during the whole temptation scene.

The temptation scene has all the characteristics of a universal picture of temptation. This is the way every human being is tempted. The serpent, with an opening question, insinuates that God has some ulterior motive for the command, that God is keeping something from humanity. The woman jumps to God's defense, but the serpent has succeeded in attracting her attention and proceeds with three half-truths: (1) "you will not die"; (2) "your eyes will be opened"; (3) "you will be like God, knowing good and evil" (vv. 4-5). It is true that when the man and the woman eat, they do not die, yet they become subject to death and will eventually die. It is true that their eyes are opened, but not in the way they anticipated. They are now aware, as they were not before, of a whole new area of human experience—the experience

what is good and what is bad." •The woman saw that the tree was good for food, pleasing to the eyes, and desirable for gaining wisdom. So she took some of its fruit and ate it; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her,

of guilt and shame. They know that they are naked. And finally, they become like God, knowing good and evil, but not in the way they had expected. To determine what it means to be "like God, knowing good and evil," we must attempt to explain the meaning of the symbol of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

There are many theories as to the meaning of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in Gen 3. While some of these theories are attractive, they are generally based upon present philosophical positions that bear little relationship to what is actually at issue in the Genesis account. The question to which we must attend in dealing with this symbol is: What does the expression "knowing good and evil" mean in this story? What kind of knowledge does God forbid?

To determine the meaning of this symbol is very difficult, for we have no comparable symbol in any other literature of the ancient Near East. Nor is the symbol, as such, treated elsewhere in the Old Testament. However, we do find the expression "to know good and evil" in the Old Testament. If we can discover what it means in other contexts, and then test that meaning in the Genesis context, it may be possible to find a plausible meaning of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

In Deut 1:39 and Isa 7:15, 16, the phrase "knowing good and evil" refers to a kind of knowledge not possessed by children. They are too young to "know good and evil." In 2 Sam 19:35, Barzillai refuses the king's offer that he return with him to Jerusalem by saying, "I am now eighty years old. Can I know good and evil?" The implication is that Barzillai as an old man is beginning to lose his faculties and so cannot be of service to the king. In 1 Kgs 3:9 and 2 Sam 14:17, the phrase "good and evil" is used (though not with the verb "to know") in the context of making wise judgments by the king on behalf of his people. In summary, we can say that to know good and evil entails the kind of knowledge required in order to make adult decisions on one's own behalf.

Does this definition make sense in the Genesis story? God places a limit on humanity. Humanity can know many things, but who is to decide what is best for humanity—the God who created humanity or the creature who was created? Chapter 3 of Genesis says that God wished to retain the knowledge of what was best for human creation. The problem is that humanity overstepped the limit imposed by God and appropriated that knowledge. Now humanity exists in the position of deciding for itself what is best. It defines itself in rebellion against its Creator.

and he ate it. Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized that they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.

When they heard the sound of the LORD God moving about in the garden at the breezy time of the day, the man and his wife hid themselves from the LORD God among the trees of the garden. The LORD God then called to the man and asked him, "Where are you?" He answered,

"I heard you in the garden; but I was afraid, because I was naked, so I hid myself." Then he asked, "Who told you that you were naked? You have eaten, then, from the tree of which I had forbidden you to eat!" The man replied, "The woman whom you put here with me—she gave me fruit from the tree, and so I ate it." The LORD God then asked the woman, "Why did you do such a thing?" The woman answered, "The serpent tricked me into it, so I ate it."

Humanity does "become like God" in the sense that now it makes its own decisions as to what is best for itself, but it makes these decisions as creature, without the wisdom and vision of the Creator. Who knows what is best for the creature—the One who created it or the creature itself? Humanity makes its own decisions, but its decisions lack the breadth and depth of God's wisdom.

The most immediate consequence of the sin of the man and the woman is the consciousness of their nakedness, which they seek to remedy by sewing loincloths of fig leaves (v. 7). We see almost at once the futility of this gesture. In the ensuing dialogue between Yahweh and the man, we note that the man, rather than answering Yahweh's question "Where are you?", gives the reason why he hid—"because I was naked." The reason is appropriate, in spite of the fact that it appears to be untrue. He is not naked, he is clothed with fig leaves. However, in relationship to Yahweh, he is naked, that is, his relationship to Yahweh has been disrupted and remains so. Humanity cannot "cover up" its own guilt and shame and restore its relationship to Yahweh. It is Yahweh alone who can remove humanity's guilt and shame. This is symbolized at the end of the story (v. 21), when Yahweh makes garments for the man and the woman.

3:8-24 The consequences. The purpose of the interrogation of the man and the woman is to bring them to an admission of their sin. It is interesting to note the all too human response of the man as he blames the woman and indirectly even God ("the woman you put here," v. 12). The woman, in turn, blames the serpent.

The punishments that follow are expressed in poetic form and are thought to be older than the story in which they are now found. The story is seen, then, as an etiology explaining such things as the reasons why serpents crawl, why there is pain in childbirth, and why farming is so difficult. These punishments are drawn from the world in which the author lives. They reflect the environmental and social conditions found in ancient Palestine.

Then the LORD God said to the serpent:

"Because you have done this, you shall be banned from all the animals and from all the wild creatures; on your belly shall you crawl, and dirt shall you eat all the days of your life.

I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers;

He will strike at your head, while you strike at his heel."

To the woman he said:

"I will intensify the pangs of your childbearing; in pain shall you bring forth children.

Yet your urge shall be for your husband, and he shall be your master."

For the man he said: "Because you listened to your wife and ate from the tree of which I had forbidden you to eat,

"Cursed be the ground because of you! In toil shall you eat its yield all the days of your life.

Thorns and thistles shall it bring forth to you,

as you eat of the plants of the field.

By the sweat of your face shall you get bread to eat, until you return to the ground, from which you were taken; for you are dirt,

and to dirt you shall return. •

The man called his wife Eve, because she became the mother of all the living.

For the man and his wife the LORD God made leather garments, with which he clothed them. Then the LORD God said: "See! The man has become like one of us, knowing what is good and what is bad! Therefore, he must not be allowed to put out his hand to take fruit from the

The ongoing struggle of humanity to survive against the attacks of venomous serpents is highlighted in the first curse (vv. 14-15). The pain associated with childbirth, incongruous with the great joy that surrounds the gift of life, is attributed to woman's participation in sin. That her husband would rule over her reflects the position of woman in ancient society (v. 16). The curse under which man works (vv. 17-19) testifies to the rocky soil and desert-like conditions of Palestine, which make farming so difficult in that region. But the story does not end on a negative note. The woman receives her name, Eve, and she will become the mother of all the living. In spite of sin and its consequences, life will go on. Yahweh makes garments for the man and the woman, thus "covering up" their guilt and shame. Yahweh's care of humanity does not cease because of sin, but continues in spite of sin. On Yahweh's initiative the relationship disrupted by sin is restored.

At the end of chapter 3 the tree of life assumes importance. It has not yet functioned as an integral part of the story, but now, because of sin, humanity is denied access to this tree and is expelled from the garden. Humanity is not able to seize the Deity's prerogative of immortality. This is ensured by stationing the cherubim at the gate. They function as guard-

GENESIS 3:23-48

tree of life also, and thus eat of it and live forever. " ²³The LORD God therefore banished him from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from which he had been taken. ²⁴When he expelled the man, he settled him east of the garden of Eden; and he stationed the cherubim and the fiery revolving sword, to guard the way to the tree of life

LESSON 1 Gen 1-3

CBC*-OT volume 2, pages 5-24

Day 1

1. Why do you want to study the Book of Genesis? What do you hope to learn?
2. What difference might it make to recognize several traditions that contributed to writing Genesis? (See Collegeville Bible Commentary introduction.)
3. How is the power of God's Word shown in this creation account (1:3, 6, 9, 11, 14, 20, 24, 26)? (See Jdt 16:14; Ps 33:6; Sir 42:15; John 1:1-3.)

Day 2

4. a) What parallels are there in the first three days of creation and the last three days (1:3-31)?
b) Why does the author stress these parallels?
5. As you read through the account of six days of creation (1:3-31), what words or phrases show that creation is an ongoing gift from God?
6. What are some human qualities that especially express God's image (1:27)? (See Ps 8:6; Wis 2:23.)

Day 3

7. What principles should govern our use of the world and its resources (1:26-30)? (See Wis 9:1-4.) Give examples.
8. a) When have your experiences affirmed the goodness of creation (1:31)? (See Ps 104; 148; Wis 13:5; Rom 1:20.)
b) When is it difficult to see the goodness of God's creation?
9. a) How is the Jewish principle of keeping holy the Sabbath attached to the creation account (2:1-3)? (See Exod 20:8.)
b) How do you keep the Sabbath holy? (See Heb 4:9-10.)

* Collegeville Bible Commentary (the previous 12 pgs are from Collegeville's commentary)

Day 4

10. a) How can you explain the existence of two different accounts of creation (2:4-25)?
b) What main lesson do both accounts teach?
11. How would a knowledge of the Hebrew language be helpful in studying the second version of creation, especially the creation of humanity (2:4-7)? (Refer to the Collegeville Bible Commentary.)
12. In this second story of creation, what distinguishes humanity from the animals (2:7, 16-20)?

Day 5

13. a) One of the author's purposes in 2:21-24 was to show against the cultural conviction of the time that women and men share equality. How is this demonstrated?
b) What are some of the misunderstandings about the equality of men and women today (in family, parish, workplace, etc.)?
14. What was it that caused the man and woman to feel shame (2:25-3:7)?
15. Describe a time when you experienced temptation. Is there anything you share in common with the man and woman in the Garden (3:1-7)? (See Heb 2:18; 4:15; Jas 1:12-15.)

Day 6

16. The man and woman attempted to hide themselves from God (3:8). When are you tempted to do the same? (See Ps 69:6; 139:1-12.)
17. What do the three punishments from God tell you about life at the time Genesis was written (3:14-19)?
18. In the early Church Mary was called the "new Eve. " How would you explain this title (3:20)?