

CREATION 2

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According to Church and Hebrew tradition, going back thousands of years, Moses is the author of the first five books of the Bible. Without disregarding its importance, we have to recognize the validity of scientific Biblical criticism which sees several kinds of approach used by different authors in Genesis. Exactly how the text was written, to what extent it used earlier religious approaches, how much it was edited later on, is unknown. We can use the first two chapters of Genesis to illustrate how two approaches are used in the account of creation.

One approach called the “Yahwist” approach, because the word for God is “Yahweh,” shows a virile imagery and symbolism in its description of God and His creation of the world. God is described in human terms: He “forms” man out of dust; He “breathes” life into him; He “puts man in the garden” and “commands” – “You may freely eat of every tree of the Garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, you shall not eat...” And they heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the Garden in the cool of the day....”

This approach is not too sophisticated. It boldly risks describing God as a kind of “Superman” and in doing this it gets across a sense of the drama of God’s presence and concern for the world, and does it in a very immediate and urgent way. Man exists because God created him. The world exists because God created it for man. And once this creation is complete, God does not remove Himself from man. He is not a clockmaker who made the world, would it up, and then let it run on its own merry way by itself. He walks in the Garden, and when He banishes man for eating the forbidden fruit, He remains present and active in all of Adam’s sons and grandsons. At the very moment that God banishes Adam and Eve from the Eden, He shows His concern for their welfare by making clothes for them. Every story in the Bible is built around the presence of God in the world; every story is an account of the relations between God and man. When man acts righteously, God is pleased and rewards him; but if man departs from the way of the Lord, a confrontation is inevitable. The point of view that the “Yahwist” approach takes is that God is the center of all human action and this gives every story a unity, an importance, a depth and breadth that are the wonder of the Bible.

The other approach taken in Genesis is called the “Priestly” approach. It has a more sophisticated view of God and a greater sense of style. Historically, it is younger than the “Yahwist” approach. It is called “Priestly” for the simple reason that it is believed to have been used by priests during Jewish religious services. This approach is much more stylized; phrases are balanced against each other; the wording is majestic, poetic. Read the first paragraph of the “Yahwist” approach (Genesis 2:4-9). It reads like someone telling an exciting story. It describes God making the earth and the heavens at a time when there were not yet any plants or any men. And then a mist rises and out of this

moist dust, God makes man and He plants a Garden for him. It is a wide “Cinerama,” a story which tells of the beginning of the world with a vast sweep of the hand.

Now read the first five verses of the first chapter of Genesis. The character is altogether different. It is more like poetry. The words come beautifully and gracefully with a clear sense of form and rhythm. The verse “In the beginning” sets the scene. Then the seven days of creation follow, each given a verse of almost identical form—“And God said...and it was so.” “And God saw that it was good. And there was evening and morning, a second (or third or forth, etc.) day.”

The pattern of the creation story is broken in the first three verses of chapter 2—“And on the seventh day God finished His work which He had done and He rested...” and “God blessed the seventh day.”

The poetic style and balance of the “Priestly” approach in the Bible lends itself well to recitation out loud during a service. It has a beautiful sound and rhythm. There is a good chance that it was chanted, the congregation chanting one part and the priest another.

The content of the Biblical account of the “Priestly” approach is even more important for its use in the Liturgy than for its style. The “Priestly” account is clearly written to imply, or to indicate, a system of beliefs—that is, a philosophy of life, or a theology. This version of the creation story instead of *describing* things as they were before the Lord created the world, presents us with an *idea*—that at the beginning of everything God created the heavens and the earth. This earth was not orderly, it had no clear form, as it has now. In other words, the first verses begin to spell out just what the nature of God’s creation was. Before that creation, the world was a void without form, a chaotic nothing. Then God made it all, creating order and form, and giving life. This act of creation was a *process* and created matter the power of growth (“Let the waters bring forth....Let the Earth bring forth....”).

The whole plan of creation as presented leads up to the seventh day. This was very important for the “Priestly” account, since the keeping of the Sabbath—the Lord’s day, the day of rest—was a religious practice that the priests wanted to emphasize. Chapter 2, verse 3, becomes very important: “So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all His work which He had done in creation.”

We get more theology in the description of the fourth day. This passage singles out the sun and the moon among the things which God created. These words become important when we realize that the Hebrews who wrote them lived among people called Canaanites, who worshipped the sun and the moon as gods. We know for a fact that Canaanite beliefs sometimes influenced some of the Hebrews (for example, see chapter 32 of Exodus describing how the people of Israel worshipped a Canaanite idol while Moses was on Mount Sinai receiving the Ten Commandments). The fourth day account reaffirms the Old Testament insight that there is only one God, saying in effect: see, they worship the sun and the moon, but *we* know that the Lord God created them.

The priests were building the people's faith, leading them in their growing awareness of God. Out of many individual religious insights they were furthering the growth of the one great religion of Israel, strengthening the truth here, rejecting falsehood there. This tendency is the great contribution of the "Priestly" account.