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EVALUATION OF THE FIRST CHAPTERS OF GENESIS

by MIGUEL ANGEL ZANDRINO

In this age of prodigious scientific conquest, the Bible is still the authoritative Word of God.

There have been many who, at different times, have attempted to read just the contents of the Bible. They have thought the Book was too old and outmoded, and that to bring it up to date would be to enrich it, dealing with it as with encyclopedias: publish new corrected editions or supplements and appendixes. One of the problems which is most disturbing to these people is the cosmivision of the Old Testament, which they consider is not in accordance with modern cosmology.

We shall endeavour in this paper to consider some of the chapters most often brought under fire, to see if they satisfy us in the light of what man has discovered about the universe.

The Two Creation Accounts

From Genesis 1 to the third verse of Genesis 2, the reader encounters a majestic account of creation. God Omnipotent expresses His will and at His Word worlds and universes appear. Vegetable life, aquatic animals, birds, higher animals and finally man are born.

This magnificent chapter has been considered as a history of beginnings and an inspired song of Creation.

But from 2:4 on we meet with a completely different scene. The narrative presents Jehovah God, who in contrast with the transcendent and spiritual God of chapter 1, is an anthropomorphic God.

Let us recall some passages: 'These are the generations of the heavens and of the earth when they were created, in the day that the Lord God made the earth and the heavens, and every plant of the field before it grew . . . Then the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul. And the Lord God planted a garden eastward in Eden; and there he put the man whom he had formed'.

Thus in verse 7 describing the creation of man, we at once see the image of the potter working his clay. Later on the writer states that 'God planted a garden' and we cannot help thinking of the gardener who spade in hand is doing his work. Then we read that Adam and Eve 'heard the voice of The Lord God walking in the garden'. Once more the author of Genesis resorts to anthropomorphism. If we bear in mind the saving purpose of the message of revelation, we shall understand the tremendous value of the teaching of these chapters.

Lessons from the Accounts

In the first place, God is a Spirit. It is as such we discover Him in the song of creation. He is the First Cause, the Transcendent Being. He creates the universe, but Himself is outside His universe. He is greater than all the world. He is a being so great, powerful and mysterious that it is beyond our thought. And he is so far away that if the revelation of what God is were to end there, it would be simply an idea which we would be unable to grasp. King Solomon stated: 'Behold the heaven of heaven cannot contain thee' (1 Ki. 8:27) and later Paul said that God dwells 'in light which no man can approach' (1 Tim. 6:10).

But this God who is so far away, whose dwelling we cannot even situate as it is beyond the unmeasurable universe that He has created, has a special interest in man and in all that may happen to man, He is not merely an observer from His throne on high, but is One who with personal care occupies Himself and preoccupies Himself with everything that happens on earth.

So that primitive man, the first reader of these pages, might understand these truths and think about God, He manifests Himself as a man, a person. He has a proper name. He is not merely God, but Jehovah God. He intervenes in the life of man, and acts on a human level.

And so that we in the present day of great scientific discoveries and of atomic and demographic explosions may always have with us this outstanding and fundamental aspect for our faith of what God is, these chapters are as fresh and efficacious as they ever were.

The Bible then leads us naturally to that truth which is so much beloved of all believers: that this Omnipotent God, pure Spirit, who is above and beyond creation, is at the same time everywhere, penetrating everything.

The Elohim of Genesis 1 must be illustrated by the anthropomorphisms of Jehovah God of chapters 2 and 3, so that we may be able to have a more perfect idea of what God is for us.

Principle of the Creation and Sustaining of the Universe

Paul in his speech to the Athenians said that in God 'we live and move and have our being'. This is the way in which God manifests himself in the universe, is present everywhere and penetrating everything, while all creation is in God.

Someone has said 'This work, the world, is like a thought of God's. Its state of creation implies the constant presence of the Creator, and not merely the initial flick of a finger'.

All things have their beginning. But it is not in the plan of God to have created everything and then to have stopped after establishing laws and forces to carry on His work. The primary idea of Genesis 1 is that

God is in the beginning of everything. In the following chapters, we see Him carrying on His work. His intervention is not limited to the origin of things and beings. In the Scriptures we see that His constant presence through ages of history is necessary. And it is Jehovah God who in a personal manner occupies Himself with the future of the world.

Ps. 104 is, like Gen. 1, a glorious song to creation. In the end it presents an image of the world and the beings which inhabit it, saying 'They wait all upon thee, that Thou mayest give them their meat in due season' (once more we have anthropomorphic figures. In this case it is the Lord feeding His creatures) 'That Thou givest them they gather; Thou openest thy hand, they are filled with good. Thou hidest thy face, they are troubled; Thou takest away their breath, they die, and return to their dust. Thou sendest forth thy Spirit, they are created: and Thou renewest the face of the earth'.

Thou renewest the face of the earth. Creation had a beginning. God was there. But He never stopped. And God is constantly present sustaining His universe and carrying on His work.

Pantheists are mistaken when they identify God with the universe, without acknowledging His transcendence and personality. But the first page of the Bible declares that God is above creation. He is more than creation. He is outside the universe. He is transcendent. The second page of the Bible states that God is immanent. That He is present in the earth. God thinks of man. He creates him. He loves him. He stoops to his level so that He may be known. He is interested in everything that happens to the human being. He intervenes in his life. The story of man is also subject to Jehovah who is the Lord of history.

In chapter 6, Jehovah gives a definite proof of His sovereignty, destroying the sinful race and saving Noah and his family. In verse 6 of this chapter it states that God 'repented' to have made man because of his falling into sin. And so we find that God himself shares the sorrow that mankind bears because of sin. God's heart (another indispensable anthropomorphism which makes us appreciate this truth dramatically) suffers, as man's heart suffers. God does not leave him long in his misfortune and pain.

Sin has plunged humanity into suffering and misery and God has been hurt as well as man. In this way the process of revelation is developed.

God transcendent and immanent. Infinitely far away and constantly present. Spirit as well as person. Elohim and Jehovah. These fundamental truths amongst others are found in these first chapters of Holy Scripture.

Correction of the Text

What would remain of these concepts if men corrected the text of the Bible? What if they were to 'demythologize' the Genesis account and to attempt to state the old ideas in modern terms? What if they were to

suppress the anthropomorphic element? What if they were to adjust the cosmivision of the Old Testament, making it conform with present knowledge?

In the first place, the conception we have of the universe is valid for today, and not for tomorrow. Cosmovision is always changing. As man penetrates a little more into the knowledge of the universe to which he belongs, he begins to see it in a different light. At present we are dominated by the idea of the inextricable complexity of the world. And as the investigator goes deeper, more complex does he find the panorama of the universe: more difficult to grasp, more elusive. The solution which might lead to the synthesis is not in sight. The analytical work in which we are engaged would seem to have disjointed everything. But we are sure that it will not always be so, and that new schema will fill the mind of man tomorrow.

On the other hand, the truths contained in the message of Revelation are unchanging. And they are offered to us in a narrative that has not lost any of its value, its vigour, its up-to-dateness and authority. Up-to-dateness and authority. These words express with precision what the Biblical narrative is. A narrative that goes on teaching us in an efficacious manner what God in His mercy has wished to have us know. That the Old Testament cosmology is quite different to the one we have today is logical. Our present day cosmology does not present the final solution. But it is the best one we have today.

The hagiographers had to think with the mind of their age, and their writings show the work of the Holy Spirit in their hearts, revealing the will of God which they were to deliver to other men, and their writings express the thought of God in terms they could understand. Thus, as Peter says in his Second Epistle: 'Holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Spirit'.

The message and the form of the message remain the Word of God, valid for those far off days and through the ages until today. And we can add without any fear of being mistaken: 'The Word of the Lord endureth for ever'.

The How of God

The anthropomorphisms of Gen. 2 and 3 do not worry us in the least. We know perfectly that God has neither hands, nor feet, nor eyes, nor a human body. But this symbolism shows us a Person approaching man. It is not necessary either to be literal in the interpretation of the image of Jehovah as the potter making man out of mud, or as a gardener planting Paradise or walking in the garden in the cool of the evening.

The purpose of Genesis is to show us that God is behind everything. That He made the world. That He created the life. That He formed man and that He gave him an exceptional place and condition in creation, having made him in His image and likeness. That He cares for man, and

that His heart suffered when man fell into sin. That He is interested in the destiny of man and from the very beginning one can see Redemption taking place.

It is not the object of Genesis to show the *how* of God. We are not told *how* He made everything. It is not a matter of procedure. The *how* of God is something which belongs to His Omnipotence, something which we would never grasp with our limited understanding. The *how* of God is something which does not interest primarily the history of redemption. It is enough for us to know that God is the author and sustainer of everything.

By means of research man will try to penetrate a little into the *how* of creation. But of course, even in this age of fabulous discoveries he has only been able to interpret partial and insignificant aspects of the unfathomable mystery of the origin of things. All that man has discovered and knows is infinitesimal when compared to what remains to be known. Research has enabled him to scratch the surface. The realities of God are infinite, and the mind of man very limited. Shakespeare expresses the idea when he says: 'There are more things in Heaven and Earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in our philosophy'. Nevertheless we are astounded with the creative capacity of the human being. Investigation presents very clear evidence of the glory or the image of God which man carries even though it has been spoiled and disfigured by sin.

But man *has* to surrender to the evidence of Holy Scripture. He has not one single possibility of entering into the depths of infinity. He *has* to be subject to what God wished to reveal about Himself. He *has* to go to the Bible as the only source where he may learn to know God, and where he will learn to know himself.

That is why we state that the Bible is still the Word of God in this age, as it was in the past, and will be in the future.

Perfection and Humiliation

For believers, the Bible is the glorious Word of God. From it issues a light which illumines the history of humanity and gives meaning to life. It is the Word of Revelation of God. It is key to the universe and to being. It is the Word of life and truth. The sublime Word which we receive in subjection.

But God has to adjust His Word to our limitation. In this sense the means utilized by the Holy Spirit in Genesis attain their saving purpose to perfection. They are the Word of God humbled in the human book, in the same way that Jesus Christ is the Eternal Word humbled in the form of a servant. In both cases, in the Bible and in the incarnate Word, God stoops to the level of man. Both represent the materialization of love and divine grace.

We say that the Bible is the humbled Word of God, because at the same time as it is the true Word of God, it is a book produced by man, a

book that has been subjected to all the contingencies of all books written by men.

There is no magic in its writing, or in its preservation or in its contents. The original documents have been lost. There is not one single autographed book. Even first copies have disappeared. There are many versions, and scholars during the last few centuries have had to study thousands of manuscripts and engage in a careful work selection to adjust the text more and more to the original.

There is no magic in its writing. God is the author, but 'holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Spirit'. Those who spoke through its page were men. And the whole Bible vibrates with the humanity of its writers and actors while at the same time one hears clearly the message of revelation.

There is no magic in its preservation. It is quite evident that God had intervened so that the Book in all its integrity should remain after passing through milleniums of history. But He has done it in the first place through the miracle of the zealous care exercised by the people of Israel, and later through the Church. Paul asks in Romans 3: 'What advantage hath the Jews?' And the reply is 'much in every way, because that unto them were committed the oracles of God'. The Jews knew how to fulfil this ministry with faithfulness and sacrifice, handing over to the Church the Old Testament as we have in our Bible.

There is no magic in its contents. But the Word of God is 'quick, and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart' (Heb. 4:12). The Bible transforms the lives of men and women who hear its message and receive it, and the secret of this powerful operation of the Sacred Book does not reside in any magic influence, but in the fact that in its pages we discover the testimony of Jesus Christ, and that the Spirit of God uses this testimony and leads us to the Saviour.

Once Jesus was speaking to the Jews (Jn. 5:39) and He said to them: 'Search the Scriptures; for in them ye think ye have eternal life, and they are they which testify of me'. The Jews were quite right in believing that in the Scripture they would find eternal life. But most of them were not prepared to go to Jesus Christ to receive it. Nevertheless, in one single day, at Pentecost, 3000 Jews listened to the message of prophecy and its fulfilment in Jesus Christ, believed in Him and were saved.

Jesus as Christ was a perfect and complete Man as well as God, the Bible is perfectly a book produced by man, as well as being the authoritative Word of God. So that it is quite logical and consistent with this concept of the Bible for the authors to express themselves through their feelings and their emotions, as also in accordance with the knowledge of the time in which they lived. Medicine, astronomy, mathematics, natural science, industries and agriculture are primitive in the Bible. They are

always a faithful reflection of the diverse cultural stages or the process of civilization among the people of each period.

And this is precisely what gives its character of authenticity to all the Bible. All its pages show vividly the experiences of the people of God within the framework of each period in which they lived.

We also state that the Bible is the humbled Word of God because of the way in which man dares to treat it without being fulminated by the judgment of God. They have burned it like the wicked king Joacim. They have trodden it under foot. They have let it gather dust on library shelves. And today there are millions who despise it, destroy it or ignore it. Books have been written to ridicule or disparage the Bible. Whole lives have been devoted to attacking and offending it. In the name of criticism it has received some of its most sinister and destructive attacks. How then is it that all these sinners have not perished as a result of their temerity? With Jesus, the Word incarnate, men also did what they wished. And they succeeded because Jesus Christ was God humbled. In his marvellous grace he submitted to mockery, humiliation and to be abandoned.

The Bible is still the Word of God even if it is abandoned in the gutter, thrown to the bottom of a lake or left on a shelf. It is the Word of God when it is read and received in the heart through the work of the Holy Spirit, and when it is rejected. It is the Word of God when it falls on good earth, and when it falls by the wayside, among thorns or among stones. The attitude of man to it does not change the character of the Word.

We are filled with wonder at the manifestation of the mercy of God and of His humbling Himself, giving man His Word in the form of a book.

The Word of God for a New Age

And now let us return to the statement with which we began this paper: The Bible is still the authorized Word of God in this age of astounding scientific conquests.

As time passes and men are able to penetrate the secrets of the universe more deeply, we can approach this Word of God with new knowledge which allows us to appreciate new mysteries hitherto hidden in the pages of the Book.

We are convinced that science, far from vitiating the integrity of the Bible, illumines our minds so that we can better understand God's message.

The famous anthropologist, Teilhard de Chardin, stated in *Etudes*, (1921) 'We must avoid losing the slightest ray of light. Faith needs all truth'. He is referring to the contribution research has made in the work of discovering the origin of man. For the believer it is perfectly clear that man was created by God. But the investigators, the scientists, would like to know, if possible, how He created him. Much information is lacking, and the knowledge of the origin of man would seem to be beyond the reach of scientific methods. But as discoveries advance and the scientific

outlook becomes clearer, the scientists can approach Genesis and value the riches of the Biblical account in a new light.

We are in favour of science and research because they are activities of the human spirit in which man shows something of the glory of the image of God he carries. For modern man, research is a fascinating prospect. The sinner regenerated by the Holy Spirit, enlightened by the Spirit of God, possessing the mind of Christ, can make use of the information supplied by science, to obtain a more complete interpretation of revelation. 'Faith needs all truth'.

The truths science has discovered through history have always contributed to faith, though at times the process was long and painful.

We shall illustrate this briefly in closing.

The Christian world received a tremendous shaking when Kepler and Galileo finished with the classical cosmogony. Unbelievers attacked the Bible. These discoveries appeared to endanger faith. Far from being the centre of creation, the earth was merely an insignificant planet of a small solar system, which was a mere point in the galaxy of the Milky Way, which is only one among the thousands of galaxies which people the universe. Man then is an insignificant mote instead of being the object and centre of God's creation.

The Christian world shook once more when man was considered as a being who belonged to the zoological scale and when he was classified zoologically in Linnaeus's systematics. And man appeared to receive another terrible blow to this privilege of being a higher creation when Freud discovered the abyss of the unconscious ego. Astronomy, biology and psychology would seem successively to have taken away the place the Bible gave man at the head of creation, as Lord over all the earth.

But the size of the world in the universe has lost all its importance. The universe of the infinitely small has been discovered and man is in the midst of these immeasurable abysses. He ventures to explore the infinitely great and the incredibly minute. He can man space ships and penetrate into the intimacy of the atom and free tremendous energy. The statement the Bible makes, that man is the lord of the earth, is more evident than ever it was.

Biologically, with his privileged brain, his place is unique among all the beings of the zoological scale. The Old Testament emphasizes repeatedly the identity of the nature of man and of animals. And in Gen. 1 man is the last of the beings which appear on the earth. On the other hand, 'thinking' constitutes a higher world, the 'noosphere' as Teilhard de Chardin calls it, in the world of man, which is the supreme expression of life.

Thus research shows that man emerges from the torrent of life, from the bowels of the earth of which he forms part, that he is deeply identified with the world, that he is crown of creation.

This is precisely what is taught in the first chapters of Genesis.