

## CHAPTER 1

# CREATION

*(Gen. 1:1–2:3)*

We are all apt to take words at their face value and to blame those who do not live up to what they say as liars or hypocrites. It is true that few are as frank as a sharp-tongued college friend of mine, who told me one day, "You must not take what I say too seriously, for my words serve as a mask to hide my real feelings," but there are many like him.

My experience is that when I meet someone who has a lot to say about faith, I can generally sense an underlying feeling of tension and anxiety, a desire to be confirmed in what he so ardently affirms. Normally true faith is so much part of the one who possesses it, that he largely takes it for granted and is little inclined to speak of it. It is easy to understand that the one who speaks much of faith is often looking out for things that can strengthen and confirm it. If he is an Evangelical Christian he seeks especially anything that will confirm the truth and inspiration of the Bible, such as the discoveries of archaeology, though these are seldom as unambiguous as is hoped.

To such seekers I have repeatedly commended the opening chapter of the Bible. It possesses a quality which is almost certainly unique. When we compare it with the efforts of pre-scientific man to explain the existence of the world and all in it, or with those of the modern scientist trying to make clear to the scientifically unversed, or even to those of his colleagues, who are involved in other disci-

plines, how life came into being, there is a certain luminosity and self-evidence about the Genesis account that are not shared by any of its rivals.

That is not all. The child and the illiterate can hear the biblical account read and gain a self-consistent and intelligible picture, while the man of science, weary after a day's work in the laboratory, can relax as he reads the story and acknowledge that here is a more convincing and satisfying picture than his detailed studies can offer.

We may go further. As the history of Bible translation shows, this story of creation can be rendered intelligibly into almost all the languages of mankind. There are those living in the frozen wastes of the Arctic for whom some of its concepts cannot be adequately expressed, and the same may be true of some whose home is in deserts far from the sea, or other great sheets of water, but these form a minute fraction of the earth's population.

Some profess disappointment, when they compare its language with the pronouncements of modern science. Had its language reflected the knowledge and concepts of the time of Moses, or indeed of any other Old Testament writer, it would long ago have been outdated. Had it embodied the knowledge and language of the second half of the twentieth century, it would have remained a closed chapter until our time, only to become outdated for our children. As it is, however, for at least eight hundred generations, it has brought to men the essential spiritual facts behind God's creating.

From it we know that nothing has come into being apart from God or exists in its own right, as is claimed by Materialism. Similarly there is no suggestion of Pantheism, which in various forms has been so popular in the past and still is today. It does not allow that nature is in any sense divine, or a sort of extension of God. Equally it excludes the idea that God is in some way part of nature and so ultimately subject to its laws.

While it has nothing to tell us of how God's will, ex-

pressed by his word, went into operation, it makes quite clear that it knows nothing of the common, modern evolutionary theory, by which mindless and impersonal nature, working according to laws, of which it is ignorant, has learnt to create the universe, as we know it today. In place of this we have divine intelligence, working out its purposes towards a predetermined goal, and ending with the verdict of "very good", i.e. exactly as willed and planned.

Not only did God place the imprint of his power and wisdom on all that he had made, cf. Rom. 1:20—something to which the discoveries of the natural sciences continually bear witness, though those that make them not seldom do their best to explain the facts away – but he stamped mankind, both man and woman (v. 27), the summit and climax of creation, with his image and likeness.

The theological implications of this expression will not be developed here – the whole of Scripture is in one sense a commentary on it – but it clearly implies two things. First of all man was made capable of knowing God and entering into a living relationship with him, and secondly it made it possible, when the time was ripe, for God to become man.

In our days the story has for many largely lost its force, because it has become the theme of polemic discussions alien to its nature and purpose. Because it has so often been forgotten that its purpose is to reveal God and not scientific knowledge, ever since the rise of modern science, many have tried to force their understanding of it on science and its discoveries. In order to maintain their own integrity many scientists have mistakenly felt it necessary to depreciate Genesis 1.

An outstanding example is the controversy about the meaning of "day", which occurs thirteen times in this section. Though in 2:4 twenty-four hours cannot be its meaning, for many it became a test of orthodoxy, and for some it still is, that it must be understood as twenty-four hours in 1:5, 8, etc., in spite of the apparently conclusive evidence

offered by the natural sciences, that it must be understood as a long period of time. In addition it seems clear from the absence of the concluding formula, "And there was evening and there was morning . . ." for the seventh day, when God kept *shabat*, desisted from his work of creation<sup>1</sup>, that this day has never ended, the work of creation having been completed for good and all.

The worthy, but inadequate, motivation for this seems to be mainly that they think that God's glory is enhanced by postulating creation over a short period rather than over long ages. Once we are prepared to accept God's power and wisdom, there seems to be no reason for preferring the instantaneous, which so appeals to short-lived man, to a purpose working itself out over long ages.

In fact, the whole controversy may well be an example of much ado about nothing. There seem to be only two serious suggestions about the origin of Genesis 1. It can be held, with many Old Testament scholars, that during the Babylonian exile, Judean priests came to know the Babylonian cosmological myths, as enshrined in the *enuma elish*, and eliminated all the crude mythological and polytheistic elements, and so produced the Biblical account. It is, of course, possible to believe that the Spirit of God should so have guided them, but for me it is far easier to accept that it was direct revelation from the first. If it was revelation, it is far more likely to have been partially in vision than purely in words; in other words the whole process of creation passed before the prophet's inner eye in six instalments. If that is so, though the days would still coincide with major divisions in the history of creation, they would refer primarily to the recipient of the revelation.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The usual rendering "rested" comes from a misunderstanding of the Hebrew, which means to stop doing a thing, desisting from it, which normally for us implies having a rest.

<sup>2</sup> The concept of days of revelation was popularized in England by P. J. Wiseman, *Creation Revealed in Six Days* (1949),\* but he had been anticipated by J. H. Kurtz in Germany about a century earlier. (See facing page.)

Similarly, there have been many and still are some, who wishing to avoid the apparent evidence of fossil remains, have translated v. 2, "The earth became without form and void", and have sought confirmation in Isa. 46:18. A little more attention to Hebrew grammar would have saved them from this;<sup>1</sup> they might then have realized that what to man might seem formless chaos, for God could be the building blocks for an ordered universe.

Some of the objections raised by modern science tend to be based on traditional renderings, e.g. the firmament of v. 6 (*raqia'*), which could equally well be translated expanse, cf. Isa. 40:22, and the use of water, where the relatively modern term gas is clearly implied.

Most of the scientific scorn today is reserved for the work of the fourth day. It is claimed that Genesis teaches that sun, moon and stars were not created until relatively late in the process of creation. We can forget the stars, for there is fairly general agreement that this is a parenthetic remark. But what of the sun and moon? The weakest element in very much Old Testament scholarship since the middle of last century has been its consistent underestimate of the intelligence of its writers. It offers no evidence that any thought that the earth's light came otherwise than from the sun, and in lesser extent from the moon.

Without taking refuge in the suggestion, which may well be correct, but is unprovable, that until the fourth day clouds and vapour cut off any direct sight of sun and moon, it is sufficient to point out that in vv. 14–19 the main stress is not on the creation of sun and moon but on their function. It could well be that this is mentioned here in parallelism to the work of the first day, but it is more likely to be in anticipation of the work of the fifth day. The story does not define life, but reserves the term "living creature" (*nephesh hayyah*) to those beings that have the power of independent

<sup>1</sup> The rendering suggested demands a change of *Hayetah* to *wa-tehi*.

\* Revised edition in *Clues to Creation in Genesis*, London, 1977.

motion. They all, in varying degree and manner are subject to the great rhythms of day and night and of the seasons, which are marked by sun and moon.

The end of God's creating had prepared the stage for man's work. As the next chapter will show, the "very good" of 1:31 does not imply that there was nothing for him to do. Good (*tob*) in Hebrew does not carry with it the same degree of moral or physical perfection that it may have in English, and here it need mean no more than that creation, at the end of God's activity, was exactly as he had planned it. "He found it very pleasing" (Speiser). "Subdue" and "have dominion over" (literally, tread down) in 1:28 are strong expressions, which imply that man would have a major task and high honour, as he faced strong opposition in enforcing the perfect rule of the God he was representing throughout the world.

### **Additional Note**

#### *Genesis 1:1f*

In contrast to the simple and majestic opening words, "in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth", with which the account of creation begins, RSV, NEB, TEV, in text or in margin, but not JB, prefer to render, "In the beginning of creation, when God made heaven and earth, the earth was without form and void . . ." This is supported by a number of modern commentators, e.g. Skinner, Speiser, but not von Rad.

This rendering is not new, for it was suggested in somewhat varying forms by Rashi and Ibn Ezra, two of the greatest of the mediaeval Jewish commentators, and it is entirely compatible with Hebrew syntax. Its present popularity is in part due to a desire to avoid the suggestion that God created chaos, a difficulty, which we have seen, has troubled some of very different views.

It seems difficult, however, to believe that in a chapter of majestic simplicity, which was almost certainly intended

for public recitation, the author would have begun with such a highly complicated sentence. Apart from the two rabbis named, the traditional rendering is universal in rabbinic exegesis, and it is found in all the earlier translations. In addition there can be little doubt that Jn. 1:1 is a deliberate reference to it.

Those wishing for a comprehensive discussion will find it in W. Eichrodt, *In the Beginning*, in *Israel's Prophetic Heritage*, edited by B. W. Anderson and W. Hareison (SCM, 1962).

In addition NEB renders, "and a mighty wind swept over the surface of the waters", which is reflected in TEV mg. This is supported by von Rad, with an unconvincing reference to Dan. 7:2, and Speiser, "an awesome wind". It is perfectly true that Elohim (God) is occasionally used to express a superlative, but this is rare, and normally poetic. It seems intrinsically improbable that in a chapter where Elohim appears thirty-two times, and another three times in 2:1-3, that it should have to be taken metaphorically in this one instance. Here again, all tradition speaks against the modern understanding.