

“Not Yet Made” or “Newly Made”

A Note on Genesis 2:5

by L. Paul Trudinger

Genesis 2:5 in AV begins “And every plant of the field before it was in the earth” (where “every plant” presumably continues the object after “the LORD God made” in the preceding verse), in RV it begins “And no plant of the field was yet in the earth”, in RSV “when no plant of the field was yet in the earth”, in NEB (by a more paraphrastic rendering) “there was neither shrub nor plant growing wild upon the earth”, and in the Jerusalem Bible “there was as yet no wild bush on the earth”. These translations, apart from the AV, imply that in the narrative of Genesis 2:4b ff. man was created before vegetation. Dr. Trudinger, Adjunct Professor of Sacred Scripture and Moral Theology in Washington Theological Coalition (not a newcomer to our pages), examines the Hebrew text in an endeavour to establish whether this is certainly so.

THE Hebrew adverbial particle *terem* is translated almost invariably as “not yet” and the conjunction *beferem* is rendered “before . . .”. I raise the question as to whether full justice is done to the basic meaning underlying these words by construing them always in this way. Gesenius¹ and Koehler/Baumgartner² are agreed in seeing the concept “beginning” as underlying *terem*. Koehler/Baumgartner has the form derived from the obsolete root *trh* (cognate with the Ugaritic *trj*?) and carrying the meaning “to be fresh” or “to be new”.³ Gesenius states that the primary idea behind this root (*trh*) perhaps lies in “plucking off”,⁴ fresh fruit, for example, being that which is recently plucked. In a similar vein he gives “a cutting off, the place where a bough has just been cut from a tree; hence beginning” as his primary entry under *terem*.⁵ It thus seems that the idea of “fresh” or “recent” is strongly connected with the basic root underlying *terem* and its cognates. Thus a phrase like *beferem boqer* may literally mean “in the beginning of the morning”, that is, “very early in the morning.” One can see how this becomes interpreted as “before the morning (had fully come).” I have checked through a large and representative number of the passages involving *terem*

1 W. Gesenius, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (trans. by Edward Robinson, Boston, 1836), p. 393.

2 L. Koehler and W. Baumgartner, *Lexicon in veteris testamenti libros* (Leiden, 1951), Vol. I, p. 356.

3 *Ibid.*

4 *Loc. cit.*

5 *Ibid.*

and *beferem* in the Old Testament and have found that many of them yield as clear a sense, and in some cases perhaps a better sense, if this idea of "recency" is incorporated in the meaning given to the phrase. A few examples will illustrate this. The words of the Lord to Jeremiah (Jer. 1: 5), "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you," involve a notion of pre-existence for the currency of which in the seventh century B.C. there is little evidence apart from phrases like this one. If, however, it means "just as soon as I had formed you in the womb . . ." that is, "from your very earliest beginnings I knew you," the passage gives a completely acceptable sense. Again, a passage like Gen. 24: 15, "Before he had done speaking, behold, Rebekah . . . came out," can just as smoothly read, "No sooner had he finished speaking when lo, Rebekah . . . came out." Would it not be appropriate that He who is surrounded by thick darkness (Ps. 97: 2) should appear to young Samuel just after the lamp had gone out, that is, in the total darkness, rather than "when the lamp of God had not yet gone out" (1 Sam. 3: 3)?⁶

In the light of these observations about the primary meaning underlying *terem*, I wish to draw particular attention to the translation and meaning of *terem* in Gen. 2: 5, with the hope that we may cast new light upon, and have a more understandable reading of, Gen. 2: 4b-9. One of the difficulties with the passage as it has traditionally been translated lies in finding the significance of v. 6: ". . . but a mist went up from the earth and watered the face of the ground." For if the absence of rain is made one of the reasons why there were as yet no plants or herbs, which seems to be the case if *kî* (v. 5) is translated as "because" or "for", this lack would seem to have been met by the situation outlined in v. 6. Granted, a second reason is given, namely that there was no man to cultivate the ground. This, however, does not really constitute a reason for the absence of plants, which surely have never been thought to grow only where man has tilled the soil. It may be suggested that vv. 8-9 treat of the creation of plants and grasses of the field, but this is not the case. These verses deal specifically with the creation of the particular garden where the newly created man was placed, and not with the creation of plants in general.

I suggest that a better sense may be given to the passage if we attend to the underlying idea of "recently" or "freshly" in our translation of *terem* in v. 5, and construe the conjunction *kî* in its well attested usage as "although."⁷ The passage now reads: "In the day that the LORD God made the earth and the heavens, and every plant of the field was newly in the earth and every herb of the field

⁶ *Terem* occurs twice again in this chapter in v. 7. There the sense may well be that Samuel was just beginning to become acquainted with the Lord.

⁷ As, for example, in Ex. 13: 17 and Deut. 29: 19.

had just begun to spring up, though the LORD God had not caused it to rain upon the earth and there was no man to till the ground; but a mist came up from the earth and watered the whole face of the ground—then the LORD God formed man. . .” Verse 6 now explains how the plants which had recently sprung up were watered despite the lack of rain, and v. 7 describes the creation of man to cultivate the plants. Thus read, the passage becomes a summary of the creation described in more detail in the Genesis 1 account. Thus also the discrepancy between the two accounts, which is present if we accept the traditional translation of Gen 2: 4b-7, in which man is created before there was any plant life on the earth, is eliminated.

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