

*THE BIBLE STORY OF CREATION—A PHASE OF
THE THEISTIC ARGUMENT.¹*

FREE, reverent discussion of the Bible is an absolute necessity for spiritual life. This arises from the fact that the Bible appeals directly to the individual, and to the individual as a being formed in the image of God. It places nothing in the first instance between a man and his Creator; the authority that it claims is the authority of rational conviction. The old divorce that both theology and philosophy made between reason and revelation is a false antithesis, and the faith that has value is that which goes hand in hand with reason.

Hence, the awakened intelligence claims to interpret in the light of reason. It will not accept without in measure understanding why; and when it finds, as it sometimes does, an apparent discrepancy between Truth as presented in Scripture, and the facts of experience (scientific or spiritual), it will not simply ignore experience and lazily acquiesce in authority. It has a higher appreciation of the Author of the world than to believe that He can rend His universe apart and demand here an irrational acquiescence which is contradictory of the result of active, rational investigation there.

Science and Theology—are they antagonistic? Can what is true in one be false in the other? If so, farewell to a whole-hearted allegiance to Truth, and to the dissipation of human anxiety and doubt.

The literature of to-day gives evidence that there are many people disturbed about the truth of the Creation story in the opening chapter of *Genesis*, and uneasy lest their doubt should be reprehensible. They struggle against

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light as intellectually apprehended, and the dictates of the heart which would counsel the total cessation of thought; and the result is in every way unnatural and unsatisfactory. A robust religious sense says, "Interrogate, inquire; and the further you push your inquiries, the better for yourselves will it be. Revelation can never be served by smothering intellect. 'Truth, like a torch, the more it's shook it shines.'"

I.

Almost half a century ago, religious belief was greatly agitated in our country by the appearance of a book that is little more than a name to the present generation—I mean *Essays and Reviews*. Elderly people—those whose minds had reached the reflective stage in the early "sixties"—quite well remember the consternation and the indignation that that composite treatise created, and the desperate efforts that were made to meet the veiled attack upon the faith (for so it was conceived) from within the Church itself. Motives, of course, were imputed on all hands, and drastic measures were counselled which, if carried out, would certainly have left a lasting stigma on the religious thought of the time. Fortunately, the controversy, although it led to sectarian persecution, did not break bones, and writers of the essays lived to enjoy high place and preferment (one as Archbishop of Canterbury and another as the head of a great Oxford College), and to become the trusted guides of inquiring minds dissatisfied with stereotyped and unprogressive notions.

Of the *Essays and Reviews*, perhaps none (with the exception of Jowett's "On the Inspiration of Scripture") aroused a greater interest, or was more eagerly canvassed, than that by Mr. C. W. Goodwin on what he designated "the Mosaic Cosmogony." Mr. Goodwin argued that if the Creation narrative in the opening chapter of *Genesis* is

to be taken as literal, infallible expression of how the formation of the world was effected, it is contradicted by the facts and ever-growing disclosures of geology, and it places science and religion in diametrical antagonism. On the other hand, he maintained that such a mode of interpretation is not the correct one, but that we reach the proper standpoint only when we go back to the principle of Galileo, "that the object of a revelation or divine unveiling of mysteries, must be to teach man things which he is unable and must for ever remain unable to find out for himself; but not physical truths, for the discovery of which he has faculties specially provided by his Creator. Hence it was not unreasonable that, in regard to matters of fact merely, the Sacred Writings should use the common language and assume the common belief of mankind, without purporting to correct errors upon points morally indifferent." In this way, it is left free to us (so Mr. Goodwin argued) to find errors, if we can, in the science of the Scripture narrative; but, finding errors, it is fatuous to attempt to reconcile Scripture with science, as so many had tried to do, or to insist, in the face of facts, that Scripture and geology are in absolute unison. That is the kernel of Mr. Goodwin's position and explains his procedure, which may be summarized in the following sentence from himself:—"Believing, as we do, that if the value of the Bible as a book of religious instruction is to be maintained, it must be not by striving to prove it scientifically exact, at the expense of every sound principle of interpretation, and in defiance of common sense, but by the frank recognition of the erroneous views of nature which it contains, we have put pen to paper to analyze some of the popular conciliation theories."

Mr. Goodwin's criticism, within the limits placed by himself, was complete: each conciliator was shown, like Aaron's rod, to swallow up the others. But this did not silence the conciliators. On the contrary, they only set themselves the

more strenuously to work to revise their science; and soon the rasping of the file was heard from many quarters, and the sound of "busy hammers closing rivets up."

The most popular of the replies (so at least I judge it) was that of Mr. Griffin, who elaborated geological tables (as Hugh Miller had done before him), designed to prove step by step that the strata of the earth harmonized exactly with the evolution of "days" in the Scripture story. That attempt (and the same applies to all similar attempts) was vitiated by two things. In the first place, it had to admit that the Mosaic narrative is not, after all, to be taken literally in the full extent of it, and, in particular, that the creation "days" are not to be understood literally: they are not and they cannot be days of twenty-four hours each. In the next place, it tacitly assumes that the revelations of geology are completed, and that the scientific knowledge at a particular date (say the year 1860, when *Essays and Reviews* appeared) is final. These flaws are fatal. The first is tantamount to allowing that the Mosaic history is not history after all, and so is virtually to give the case away at the beginning; and the second forgets that geological knowledge is constantly progressing, and that conciliators, if they are to benefit by its advance, must be constantly revising their answer—a point that is emphatically pressed home upon us by the circumstance that such a revision was precisely what Mr. Gladstone undertook, in the pages of one of our popular magazines, two decades later, only to be mercilessly criticized by Huxley from the side of science.

Not in that way, then, can difficulties be surmounted. Only when we reach the limit of scientific knowledge in the sphere of geology can we even begin to offer a plausible reconciliation.

A much more hopeful line was taken in the rejoinder made by Dr. Rorison, of Peterhead, who had already dis-

tinguished himself by his papers on "The Three Barriers." It was now seen that the Creation story must be studied apart from prejudices and preconceived opinions, and interpreted in the light of its own structure and declarations. Accordingly, looking to the structure of it, and examining the terminology with care, it became apparent that the Mosaic heptameron, or creative week of seven days, is a whole, inclusive of a whole. While, on the one hand, it declares that the universe is not self-derived and self-subsistent, but is the creation and completed work of God, it maintains, on the other hand, that not only does the universe owe its being to Him, it owes its furnishings or occupants as well. The six work-days are not six successive periods of time, each complete in itself, yet fixed in the order of its occurrence, so that the prior leads up to what follows, but they are an exhaustive inventory of the universe conceived as the result of God's Creatorship. It is as if the writer swept the world with his eye, taking in its parts in successive glances, and seeing in every part and every object that contributed to fill the parts testimony to one and one only truth—viz., "the hand that made us is Divine,"—and then proceeded to enunciate in pictorial language this great thought, following the order that his eye had taken (though not attaching any specific significance to the order), and regarding each glance as exhausting a definite part. Sequence in the exposition there unquestionably is, as there must be sequence in every exposition, on whatsoever subject, that we make: there is order in the presentation of ideas, just as there is order in the lantern slides that illustrate a modern lecture; but the sequence is not chronological but logical, the order is subservient to the writer's end, and that end is to impress upon his readers the one supreme truth that creation implies a Creator, and that the whole world is full of the Creator—He first, He last, He everywhere. Consequently, the creation "days"

simply designate completed views or glances, *and are not successive in time*—which they must have been, had they designated time days or even prolonged periods. *The presentation returns upon itself, and returns for the purpose of filling up the original outline with materials or content.* The first three days give the general outline and traverse the whole universe. Day 1 places the region of light under the Creator (“God said, Let there be light: and there was light”); day 2 puts under His sway the air and the sea (“God said, Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters, and let it divide the waters from the waters . . . And God called the firmament Heaven”); day 3 ascribes to His creative power the formation of the Earth and the clothing of it with vegetation (“And God said, Let the waters under the heaven be gathered together unto one place, and let the dry land appear . . . And God said, Let the earth put forth grass, herb yielding seed, and fruit tree bearing fruit after its kind”). The second three days *re-traverse these same three spheres*, and fill in the details. Day 4 goes back to day 1 and collects the light into centres—sun, moon, and stars (“God said, Let there be lights in the firmament of heaven . . . And God made the two great lights; the greater light to rule the day, and the lesser light to rule the night. He made the stars also”); day 5 corresponds to day 2, and peoples the waters and the air with marine animals and with birds (“And God said, Let the waters bring forth abundantly . . . and let fowl fly above the earth in the open firmament of heaven”); day 6 is the counterpart of day 3, and replenishes the dry land with terrestrial creatures, including man, and gifting the pre-existing vegetation to them for food (“And God said, Let the earth bring forth the living creature after its kind . . . And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle,

and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth . . . And God said, Behold, I have given you every herb yielding seed . . . to you it shall be for meat: and to every beast of the earth, and to every fowl of the air, and to every thing that creepeth upon the earth").

Now, if this be so, it is clear that there is here no geological record—no attempt at teaching science. If the description returns upon itself, that continuity of time is wanting which alone gives meaning to geology and is necessary for evolution. There is simply the literary or pictorial presentation of certain great metaphysical truths that underlie religion—a sublimely poetic account of the fundamental religious dogma that "the earth is the Lord's, and the fulness thereof; the world, and they that dwell therein." It may well be that the world is a "process," with a definite time-history; but that lies outside the writer's conception.

In this there are certain things involved. In the first place, matter is to be conceived as dependent on mind; and neither the material out of which the ordered universe is constructed nor the ordered universe itself is eternal: God alone is eternal, and from Him is derived all that exists; for "what is seen hath not been made out of things which do appear." In the next place, the fulness of the Divine creative energy is insisted on under the symbolism of creative "days" (just as in modern times it might be shown by means of lantern slides). There is nothing that is exempted from the creative fiat: everywhere God's power penetrates, operating here in one way, there in another, here separating elements (light from darkness, the waters above from the waters below, sea from dry land), there fashioning products (the heavenly bodies, terrene and terrestrial things, the lower animals and man); in its operation, it is complete,—“And the heaven and the earth were

finished, and all the host of them. And on the seventh day God finished His work which He had made; and He rested on the seventh day from all His work which He had made. And God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it: because that in it He rested from all His work which God had created and made." In the last place, the God who is Creator is a personal God—thinking, willing, loving, doing all things with a purpose, for a noble and beneficent end. The language is intensely anthropomorphic, as it behoved to be, inasmuch as it is addressed to man, and man (as here set forth) is the crown of creation and made in the image of God. God is represented, not as a mere impersonal principle or as a cold mental abstraction, but as a living Person, deeply interested in His work and throwing His whole energy into it, viewing every part of it when finished as "good" and pronouncing the whole to be "very good"—a Person, not standing aloof and viewing things with indifference, but stamping Himself on His creation, and eager that His creatures should be bound to Him by indissoluble bonds—a Person, whose thought conceived the world, whose love prompted the production of it, whose will achieved it—an active living power, working for a loving end, and, when the result is reached, resting from His labours that He might be "refreshed."

II.

Such then is the interpretation of the Creation section of *Genesis*: let us now see its significance or value. That will best be found if we attend to how Scripture itself treats the Creation story. We never find it appealing to it as a scientific record, but always using it for its theological and spiritual import. It is made the ground of religious faith, and, consequently, the basis of religious living.

The first application that I observe in Scripture has reference to *practice*. It is given in connexion with the

institution of the Jewish Sabbath. The fourth commandment distinctly lays it down as the reason for "remembering the Sabbath day, to keep it holy" that "in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is, and rested the seventh day: wherefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day, and hallowed it." In other words, it is here enjoined that the life of man be modelled on the life of God. That is the same thing as saying that man's consciousness of his relation to the Supreme is to be kept alive, and the perception of his dignity as a being formed in God's image realized, by the explicit conforming of his earthly life to the plan of the Divine life. That plan is Work and Rest—a weekly or recurrent reminder, suitable to a finite forgetful being, of the Divine fulness of energy, and a stimulus to us to base our daily conduct on the religious idea. Not mundane concerns are alone to occupy us, not even necessary worldly duties, but these sanctified and ennobled by a reference to the heavenly sanction and to the solemnity and sanctity of human life—work and rest, work rounded off by rest, work issuing in rest, our ordinary avocations elevated and blessed by a constant reference to their deeper spiritual end.

The prototype of the Divine Rest takes a different form in *The Epistle to the Hebrews*. The writer there is arguing in behalf of Christianity that it, and it alone, can give the true rest—here is found the rest, the "Sabbath-rest (*σαββατισμὸς*)" that "remaineth for the people of God." The Creation story of *Genesis* supplies his fundamental idea, but he gives a special turn to the application of it. He is not thinking, like the fourth commandment, of the contrast between six working days and a day of rest as fitted for the just development of man's character, but of the true nature of spiritual rest, of that Sabbatic peace towards which we are striving—for which the ancient Hebrews strove, but which they did not attain. The Old

Testament had represented it under the figure of a promised inheritance, of the land of Canaan; and Hebrews were prone to think the fulfilment of the promise had been made when Joshua settled the wandering tribes in Palestine. But this superficial notion the writer sweeps aside by pointing to the fact that, long after Joshua's time—in the time of David—God still spoke of the rest as something future. The future, he maintains, had now become present. What Moses could not do, what Joshua failed to accomplish, Christ had effected, and through the everlasting gospel had brought to men the rest that remaineth. "Let us, therefore, give diligence"—that is his practical conclusion—"to enter into that rest, that no man fall after the same example of disobedience."

But the Creation story has not only practical worth to the Bible writers, it has also *emotional* value. I need only refer to the book of *Psalms*, and to the use that the sweet singers of Israel make of it. It will be enough for my purpose if I adduce two leading Creation psalms—the eighth and the one hundred and fourth. The eighth psalm is a choice song of thanksgiving, extolling the excellency of the Lord because of His creative power as manifested in the heavens, but still more because of the high place He has assigned to man among the works of creation, "having made him but a little lower than God, and crowned him with glory and honour" and having given him dominion over the works of His hand, and, more especially, over the lower animals. It is essentially a paean on man's dignity—to be specifically referred, later on, by the writer of *Hebrews*, directly to Jesus Christ as the perfect or ideal Man.¹ Psalm 104 is also a psalm of creation, but still more, perhaps, of continual Divine preservation; the original story in *Genesis* being expanded by poetic touches suggested by the writer's own experience of the actual world,

¹ See Chapter II,

and supplemented by striking reference to God's sustaining power manifested everywhere in the world of life and action. In each case (both in Psalm 8 and here), we have a hymn of praise and adoration, framed for the worship of the sanctuary and designed to minister to the spiritual needs of those who use it. Although the first chapter of *Genesis* affords a basis for both, it is not a scientific but a poetic and devotional basis; and points from the original Creation story are selected by each of the sacred writers—such as are conformable to the mood in which he finds himself, and to the purpose he has in view. No literal reproduction of the narrative itself is in either case contemplated; but an adaptation of it suitable for devotion and the ends of religion.¹

Not yet, however, is the Bible use of the Creation section of *Genesis* exhausted. Practice and emotion must be ministered to, but metaphysics and dogma are also essential to man's spiritual health and welfare. And so *dogma*, *metaphysics*, *theological doctrine* are evolved from it. The point specially fixed upon is, of necessity, the Creator Himself and the nature of the Divine energy. "In the beginning God created." Through what means? by whose agency? The answer to this question is given more vaguely, yet with graphic portraiture, by the Old Testament; explicitly and fully, with great sublimity and grandeur, by the New.

The solution of the Old Testament is found mainly in the Sapiential writings; more especially, in the book of *Proverbs*, and there pre-eminently in the eighth chapter. This is the *locus classicus* for the Hebrew doctrine of

¹ The same holds also (I may mention in passing) of the poetic book of Job. Where the emotion is highest, the Creation reference becomes most explicit. It is when the Lord answers Job out of the whirlwind (chapter 38) that the culminating point of awe and, therefore, of veneration is reached; and the effect is produced by directing the thoughts to "the beginning"—when the foundations of the earth were laid, "when the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy."

Kochmah or Wisdom, which so magnificently foreshadowed that of the Divine Logos.

The Lord possessed me as the beginning of His way,
 The first of His works of old.
 I was set up from of old, from the beginning,
 Or ever the earth was :
 When there were no depths, I was brought forth,
 When there were no fountains abounding with water.
 Before the mountains were settled,
 Before the hills was I brought forth.
 While as yet He had not made the earth, nor the fields,
 Nor the beginning of the dust of the world.
 When He set up the heavens, I was there,
 When He drew a circle upon the face of the deep.
 When He made firm the skies above,
 When the fountains of the deep became strong.
 When He gave to the sea His decree,
 That the waters should not transgress His commandment,
 When He marked out the foundations of the earth :
 Then I was by Him as a master workman,
 And day by day was I (full of) delights,
 Playing before Him at all times ;
 Playing in His habitable earth,
 And my delights were with the sons of men.¹

In that splendid passage, we have "the Spirit of God" of the original story—the same that "brooded upon the face of the waters"—personified as the Divine Thought—uncreate, yet begotten, and represented as the primal movement of the Divine Activity : first, begotten before all else ; next, revelling in its creative energy, yet looking to God Himself for its being, and *sporting* "before Him," delighting to effect His purpose and to achieve His highest idea—viz., "the habitable earth" and "the sons of men." There is development here of the original conception, and the trend is obviously in the direction of the New Testament, and, more especially, of the Personal Word or Logos of St. John.

¹ Mainly Prof. A. B. Davidson's translation. See EXPOSITOR, 1st series, vol. xii. p. 455.

At the opening of the Prologue of St. John's Gospel, we read (using, for greatest clearness, the oldest punctuation—that of Tatian—and translating accordingly): "In the beginning was the Logos, and the Logos was with God, and the Logos was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by Him; and without Him was not anything made. That which hath been made (δ γέγονεν) was life in Him; and the life was the light of men. And the light shineth in the darkness; and the darkness apprehended it not." And, further on in the Prologue, we find, "the Logos became flesh, and dwelt among us (and we beheld His glory, glory as of the only-begotten from the Father), full of grace and truth."

Clearly, in this we have the just complement of the Wisdom section of *Proverbs*; but not less clearly have we here the just complement of the opening section of *Genesis*: it is a re-reading of the Creation story, with a deepened interpretation. Both in *Genesis* and here, we are transported to "the beginning," when creative work had to be done ("In the beginning God created"—"In the beginning was the Logos"); in both, the language is fitly wedded to the conceptions, producing on the reader an impression that is absolutely unique; in both, we hear the distant roll of thunder—all the more impressive that it is subdued.

The same thought is taken up in the introductory verses of *Hebrews*, which form a magnificent summary of the whole teaching of the Epistle, where the writer speaks of "the Son" as the agent "through whom also God made the world," and presents Him in a bold figure as the great Atlas bearing the world on His shoulders—"upholding ($\phiέρων$) all things by the word of His power." And, then, when, at the close of Scripture, a door is opened in heaven to the Seer of Patmos, the sight that greets him is that of the four and twenty elders "falling down before Him that sitteth on the throne, and worshipping Him that liveth for

ever and ever, and casting their crowns before the throne, saying, Worthy art Thou, our Lord and our God, to receive the glory and the honour and the power: for Thou didst create all things, and because of Thy will they were, and were created."

And so we see the significance that is attached to the Creation story by Scripture itself; the Bible ending as it began. It is used purely for edification—partly to aid the believer's conduct, partly to stimulate his devotion, and partly to serve as the vehicle of still higher Revelation, disclosing to him his own nature, and imparting such a knowledge of God as would best conduce to his spiritual development and his religious advance.

III.

Two conclusions inevitably suggest themselves, each of practical importance.

In the first place, if the opening section of *Genesis* is not literal history, but a sublime parable, dealing with the ground-principle of existence, enunciating the deep truth of the unity of the world (the fact that it is a universe, an ordered whole, a *cosmos*, a *mundus*, a *tebhel*), and of the relation between man and his Maker, then we need be little troubled by the alleged antagonism between the Creation story and modern science. Irreconcilable contradiction there can be none: the one deals with the facts of Nature (analyzing, generalizing, methodizing, synthesizing), and the other with the religious interpretation of the facts, which of necessity must be also metaphysical—a different matter, but not in any way opposed.

In the next place, if the significance of the Creation story be as I have maintained, then the opening section of *Genesis* becomes the very basis of our religion—the foundation on which the superstructure is reared. Remove this, and the building falls. The Old Testament and the New

are a unity, and “*re-creation*” looks back to, and is dependent on, “*creation*.” Both repose on the personality and creatorship of God, on His sovereignty over, and His interest in, the universe that owes its existence and its continued being to Him, on His intense concern for the creatures of His hand, and, more especially, for man, whom He formed in His own image.¹ It is only if God did at the beginning “command the light to shine out of darkness” that He “hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.” The second is inseparably bound up with the first, and the two stand or fall together. The scheme of the Revealed Word is one; and the faith of the Christian should also be one—it should be like the garment of our Lord, “without seam, woven from the top throughout.”

WILLIAM L. DAVIDSON.

¹ The Creation song of *Revelation* is that of the four and twenty elders—i.e., of “the glorious company” of the twelve *Jewish* patriarchs and the twelve *Christian* apostles.