

The Word of God in the Genesis Creation Account

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[Printed in Nexus, Vol. 6:1 (March 1966).]

In the Holy Scriptures the "Word of God" is not just divine information. It is God in action speaking about me. If the opening chapters of Genesis are to be the Word of God they must say something about me and what God is doing, has done, or wants to do to me. They must be, as Karl Barth says, theoanthropology—something about **theos** and **anthropos**, God and me together.

The Christian understanding of creation is an article of **faith**. We **believe** in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth. We confess this is an aspect of our faith. We do not say that these are the facts that you'll see for yourself if you investigate open-mindedly or scientifically. No, creation itself is an article of faith. It is not by scientific investigation, but "by faith we understand that the world was created by the Word of God so that what is seen was made out of things which do not appear."

That brings up a second item. It is the Word of God, the creative Word, that brings reality into existence and establishes not only its factual existence but also its qualitative value. Whether any piece of reality is qualitatively plus or minus depends on the verdict of the speaking God, i.e., it depends on the Word of God. If there is any merely information message in chapter 1 of Genesis, it is this. Genesis

and all the Holy Scriptures are concerned to present the talking God. This is the distinctive characteristic of the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. He is the speaking God. That is His trademark, from Genesis to Revelation. Thus when the Old Testament prophets contrast Yahweh with the pagan gods and even ridicule the pagan gods, their favorite point of comparison is that other gods are dumb. That does not mean stupid; it means they do not talk, but Yahweh does. In Yahweh's talking reality is created and quality is given. Life or death happens.

So far we have made two points. First, creation is an article of faith; secondly, the focal point for creation and the God of creation is that He is the speaking God. The third point zeroes in on the term theo-anthropology.

When Christians confess their faith in God the creator, as in the Creeds, we not only acknowledge something about God, but we also acknowledge and confess something about ourselves. In confessing the Creed I not only say that I am convinced and trust that God is my Creator, but I am also confessing the fact that I am His creature. In the Small Catechism Luther says in effect, "What are you confessing when you confess the First Article? You are not just confessing some 'true facts' about God, but you are confessing 'true facts' about God and yourself. I believe that God has made **me**, and all creatures, that He has given **me my** body and soul and all **my** members, etc." The first person singular pronoun "me" or possessive adjective "my" occur all the way down the line. In the Large Catechism, on the First Article, Luther summarizes this when he says that creation teaches us that none of us has his life of himself. Our life is always a donated reality, a gift; and the donor, the giver is God.

The doctrine of creation and my confession of God as Creator and me as His creature is in itself not yet the Gospel. In the

Lutheran tradition if anything is to be the Word of God, it must be correlated to the Law and Gospel. The Gospel too is not just information about God, but it is God in action doing what the Gospel talks about. The doctrine of creation is in itself not the Gospel, although it is closely related to it, for this very world which is creation is the object of God's redemption, love, and reconciliation.

Just as faith in the Gospel is not **fides historica**, simply admitting the factuality of certain historical events, so also faith in creation is not my knowledge and admission that these are the facts about how things really happened in the beginning—either the beginning of the world (Gen. 1) or the beginning of the human race (Gen. 2) or the beginning of the sinful human race (Gen. 3). Just as faith in the Gospel is my confidence in the God who in Jesus Christ is fulfilling His promises to me, so also faith in the creation is always faith in God as my Creator, in the effects of His creative activity on me. Once more Luther captures this gloriously in the Small Catechism. Not only has God given me my life, body, eyes, ears, and all my members, but He still preserves them, making me the continued object of the creative activity of God. This is what evangelical theology understands as faith in terms of the creation.

At least one more point is significant for Lutherans as they study the Word of God in Gen. 1-3. Regardless of what the Genesis account may have meant for the original author, it becomes Word of God when I see that the main human character in these chapters is a picture of myself; that I too was designed and destined to be an **imago Dei**, a God-reflector. When I see that this was or is **my** destiny, and when I see also that I daily fail to live such a destiny as God's reflector, then Gen. 1-3 really has become the Word of God for me.

In this case, Word of God is Law as God opens up to me the reality of my situation, that I was made to be a perfect God-reflector and at best am just a cracked mirror. Once more in the Large Catechism, Luther indicates that the First Article is not Gospel but the most terrifying and condemning Law when I start applying what the article of creation says to me. He observes that this article would humble and terrify us all if we really believed it. Why? Because we daily do our sinning with what God has put around us. Creation is the very stuff with which we perform our sinful rebellion. The article of creation when applied to a normal sinner becomes the proclamation of condemnation. Yet Luther reminds us that Christians have an advantage over those people who don't confess the First Article at all in that a Christian at least acknowledges that he is duty bound to be a God-reflector, even if he is doing a miserable job. We memorized those words once: "For all which it is my duty to thank and to praise, to serve and obey Him. This is most certainly true."

Any Christian who reflects on that for a moment has to say, "Yes, for all of which it is surely my duty, but for all of which I surely don't fulfill my duty."

When we look more closely at Genesis 1 and 2, we encounter the problem of the meaning and relationship of what seems to be two creation accounts. Claus Westermann suggests that one can view chapters 1 and 2 as God's Word in answer to two central questions. First is the mystery or riddle of the world. Man himself does not play a very prominent part in chapter 1; he's special; he's called the image of God, but he is not the main mystery. Genesis 2 presents the mystery of man. And then—following Westermann's lead—we might label chapter 3 as the mystery of sin.

Genesis 1 does not explain the world, nor is the mystery of man and sin explained by the Word of God in Gen. 2 and 3. It may be

that one central Word of God we should get from each of these chapters is God's Word to us that we are not even in the position to comprehend the world, our own human existence, and human sinfulness. One aspect of the mysteries in chapters 1 and 2 is that I am never really in charge of the world or my own existence. My only involvement is that I'm always on the receiving end. If anyone can really understand the world or human existence, it would have to be the one on the giving and creating end. God himself understands; but for those of us on the receiving end, we are never able to understand because we are the product of the action. To use Jeremiah's potter-pot imagery, we might say that if there is anyone who understands what really makes up a clay pot, it's not the pot but the potter. When this pot starts acting very "unpottish," when it tries to act as though it can understand the world and its own existence as if it really is in charge of its own life, that's when it becomes a cracked pot. When it has ceased to be what it was basically structured to be, not only does it not understand its own existence but it ceases to understand God—understand in the Biblical sense of knowing, fearing, loving, trusting, and depending upon God.

The mystery motif also figures into human sinfulness in Gen. 3. Sin is a fact, a reality, but a reality that has the word mystery written over it. Here too, I am apparently on the receiving end; I am the victim. I am not in charge, but sin is in charge of me.

Perhaps a more simplified way of looking at this is to put the mystery into a question. The mystery of chapter 1 would be, "Why does anything exist?" —a question that the world poses. In chapter 2 the mystery of human existence is, "Why do I exist at all?" The Biblical answer to these questions is that God called you and the world into existence. When we move to the third mystery, we encounter the **double** mystery of human sinfulness:

God does not want it and yet it is.

Throughout Gen. 1-3, we run into concepts and word pictures that apparently were part of the religious vocabulary of the ancient Middle Eastern world—the garden, the special trees, the rivers, the serpent and cherub. All of these things are common in Mesopotamian, Canaanite, and Egyptian religion – in the world where the Old Testament people lived out their lives. To study these parallels or counterparts in the religious environment of the Israelites is the work of comparative religion, but it does not automatically make Gen. 1-3 into the Word of God for us. This is our chief goal today.

There is another interesting scholarly exercise which we can run on Gen. 1-3, namely aetiological research. Aetiology is just a fancy word for “here’s an explanation of how particular things came to be the way they are.” Thus one might say that Gen. 1 is an aetiology for why the Jews don’t work on the seventh day, an explanation for the custom of the Sabbath. God sanctified that day; He put a special blessing on it.

There are other such aetiological elements that one could see at work in the Genesis account of the creation and fall, but it seems to me they too are not the ultimate Word of God for us as we read this. For example, what holds the stars up in the sky? Where did bi-sexuality arise? When did people first start wearing clothes? Why the pain of childbirth or the necessity for toil? Many such aetiological elements seem to be reflected in Gen. 1-3, but now let us take a closer look at the Gen. 2 text.

“These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created.” Here we have, as we do in Gen. 1:1, a caption sentence which serves to introduce what for the moment we’ll call the second creation account. Here are the origins of the heaven and earth. The narrative text begins, “In the day

that the Lord God made the earth and the heavens, when no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no herb of the field had yet sprung up—for the Lord God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no man to till the ground; but a mist went up from the earth and watered the whole face of the ground—then the Lord God formed man of the dust from the ground.” In this account man himself is the first thing that God consciously goes to work to create. If you stop for a moment, you can see the different perspectives of Gen. 1 and 2. In Genesis 1 man is the last to be created. Chapter 1 is presented to us from an almost transcendent view, as though the writer is sitting way out in space. First there’s light, then space. Next God fills in the space with His expanded universe and finally gets down to creating man. Genesis 2 starts with man and works out. First God creates man. Then He plants a garden and puts man in the garden. From this garden comes a river that goes into the whole world. Genesis 1 moves from the big outside down to the narrow inside. Genesis 2 starts with man and goes back to the big outside. In either case what is important is what God is saying about me, my life, and my creation.

The Genesis creation account also gets us involved in some de-mythologization performed by the original author himself. In chapter 2 He is taking a look at some other creation stories—the Babylonian account or the Canaanite understanding of how Baal runs the world—and He is saying that these stories are frauds. Whatever is accredited to Marduk in Mesopotamia or to the various Baals in Canaan insofar as actual creation is concerned, is really to be ascribed to Yahweh. In the Canaanite context, Baal was the rain god who by sending rain controlled agricultural fertility and productivity. Genesis 2 says that the One who controls the rain is not Baal but Yahweh. Yet here too the Word of God for us is not primarily what Yahweh is doing about the rain, but what He is doing about the human being and

his relationship to Himself.

“The Lord formed man of dust and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; the man became a living being.” Here initially there seems to be a point of difference from the creation account of Gen. 1. God does not speak when creating in chapter 2, while chapter 1 presents His creating as spoken action. Here He talks after the act. God speaks in chapter 2, but the focal point of His language is not the creative act. However, in the creation of man there is an interesting parallel to God’s speaking, viz., God’s breathing. God breathes into man. In both cases it is the breath that comes from God which creates man, whether by vocalization or by aspiration. As the Psalmist says, “By the **word** of the Lord were the heavens made and all the hosts of them by the **breath** of his mouth.”

Both Gen. 1 and 2 testify that man’s existence is a God-breathed reality which comes into existence only by virtue of God’s special action. Upon the completion of man’s creation, God planted a garden and put man in the garden to till it and keep it. God Himself sets up a symbiotic arrangement whereby man and other things would live together. This mutual co-creatureliness is reflected in the Small Catechism: I believe that God has made me **together** with all creatures. Man and all creatures were made for each other.

And the Lord God commanded the man saying, “You may eat freely of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.” Just what this tree was, as well as its relationship to the tree of life, is a sub- mystery to the main riddle of the chapter. Apparently it has an opposite relationship to the tree of life because God says if you partake of the fruit of this tree, you die. One possible interpretation which seems plausible is that knowledge of good and evil is

never an intellectual reality. Knowledge, says the Old Testament, is participatory involvement; and the only reason you would have knowledge of good and evil is that you've crossed the line into evil where you also become conscious of its contrary, good. Wasn't Jesus working from a similar perspective in the Sermon on the Mount when he radicalized the Ten Commandments, especially those against murder and adultery? In his exposition of Commandments five and six, Jesus was working on the premise that the people were already on the wrong side of God's will. Jesus says lust is already adultery, just as hatred is already murder. The point here is not a new definition for the dictionary but a new perspective when listening to Commandments five and six. How did we find out what hatred or lust really are? I'm sure none of us consulted Webster. We know what they are because we discovered them inside ourselves. To admit knowledge of hatred and lust is to admit participation in them. To know good and evil means to be an already fallen creature. Not having this knowledge is thus really the pure, holy, integral situation of man in integrity with God.

The remaining verses of chapter 2 (18-25) can be labeled as the formation of man into a social being. "Then the Lord God said, 'It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him.' So out of the ground the Lord God formed every beast of the field and every bird of the air and brought them to the man; but for the man there was not a helper to fit for him. So, the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man..."

This paragraph of Genesis begins with God talking to Himself as He notices that man is lonesome. So God creates some companionship-animals. We have the picture of God parading them past Adam and saying, "How about this one, Adam?" and Adam says, "Nice, but it looks like an elephant." So it goes all the way down the line, but none is "fit" for the man. Adam looks at all

these things and says, "Nice, but nope, that's not it."

This negation is not simply in terms of the sexual element, as though Adam were saying, "Nope! I can't marry that and perpetuate my kind." The central point is that as friendly and as nice as animals can be, animals are always just **objects**; and they are not the same kind of creatures that I am in that I am a **subject**. Human creatures are subject and object, and in our normal life we switch back and forth. Sometimes I'm on one side of the verb performing an action. At other times I'm on the other side receiving the actions of others. To be sure, animals can initiate some action in response to my action, but it can't be that kind of response that you expect from a human.

The creation of Eve is not primarily the creation of a sexual partner for man, but the creation of another subject. Man's existence is designed by God to be a communal one. The other human being is always a gift. God had first of all brought along the animals and gave them to Adam, but that wasn't the gift of another creature that is essentially like me and yet not me. This one is another creature outside of me, that is first of all an object to me, but reveals itself to be another subject as it talks to me and with me and "fits" my own existence.

We might make some further connections with the notion of man as the image of God. In what sense can man reflect God? In God's activity as creator, making things out of nothing, there is little that we creatures can correspondingly do; but in the way God does this creating, we do correspond to Him. It is in our ability to talk that some of the central content of the image of God is seen to exist. Our having language makes interpersonal relationships possible, first of all between God and me. Since God is a talking God, He can call to me. Because I am a talking creature, I am capable of responding. I may respond, "Don't talk to me, God." Like Adam I may run, hide, and try to escape the

call that God addresses to me. Being in the image of God means that I am able to respond, response-able. When God talks to me, I can talk back to Him; and, as Adam found out, I can even give God back-talk. When the image starts giving God back-talk, it has become irresponsible—a cracked image.

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Although man's special creaturehood entails his listening and speaking with another being, there is no recorded dialogue either vertically or horizontally before chapter 3. Genesis never presents any of the conversation between God and man or between man and man before the Fall. Whatever that was, or whatever that might someday be, it is veiled from our eyes. What we know as human history is always history after the Fall. We never meet the man in perfect harmony with God. We know that our own selves are not like that, and it becomes apparent that other beings with whom we live are not like that either. Thus one could say that Genesis 1 and 2 are "pre-history," which describes a kind of life that none of us has ever known. The history we know is the history of people "after the Fall," the history of people who die. Yet there was nothing that we sense as "death" present in their existence. In this sense it is pre-history; it is nothing like the life I encounter in my history.

"So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man...and the rib which the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. Then the man said, "This, at last, is bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh." After all the elephants and chipmunks, Adam is saying, "This is another human being. This is one like me, even though she has derived her existence from God's first human being." The aetiology of her name is that she is called woman because she was taken out of man.

Then follows an aetiological word on marriage. Marriage did not come by accident or social evolution, but it came because God

said this man and this woman should be one flesh. They are not just two sexual partners who come together to procreate but two human subjects in their marriage become and constitute a new reality. In the union of these two people a third reality, a new "flesh," comes into existence.

The last sentence of chapter 2 becomes pertinent for what follows in chapter 3. "And the man and his wife were both naked, and they were not ashamed." The nakedness here has little explicit sexual connotation but represents being able to live with nothing to hide. This is the state of man before the Fall. The wearing of clothes is not just a matter of what temperate zone you live in. Humans can exist naked before one another when everything is in order with God, for then the human beings have nothing to hide, not only from God, but also from each other. They function as mirrors of God reflecting their creator to each other. It's not the clothes that inhibit the effective reflection of God but the broken people who no longer can be God-reflectors to each other. In Gen. 2, however, it is not yet like that. If Adam's first comment when he saw Eve was, "At last, that's it!" then Eve's first comment should have been, "You know, you remind me of somebody I know." That's the natural activity of unencumbered "naked" man: to be a God-reflector.

Genesis 3 moves to the tragedy of human history, where people are not God-reflectors, where clothing is not just a physical necessity but symbolizes a theological reality: that human life cannot go on when people are exposed to each other's personhood. Life can only go on when there is some kind of guaranteed separation that holds persons apart. That's one of the facts of life "after the Fall."

To conclude: The Word of God in the creation account does not tell me what God's knowledge of creation is or how God understands it. Genesis says God created through His Word, but

even that does not unveil the mystery of creation. The Word of God in Genesis 1-3 is the truth about me, which is what God says about me: I am His.

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