If They Hear Not Moses - - - -

Reason and Revelation in Genesis 1-3.

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This essay has grown out of a continuing concern for the health of present-day education. Our classrooms are still afflicted with the disease of Cartesianism. It remains the general belief that teaching and learning properly begin with the question of thought rather than with existence, i.e., what is the case.

The notion persists that there are infinite conceptual possibilities open to reason. Thus one is encouraged never to make up his mind about anything since he is always appropriating conceptually the possible.

Yet the case is quite other for Everyman. He has a finite number of days in which to work out his salvation with fear and trembling. The sophistry of understanding seeking faith instead of faith seeking understanding inverts the natural order (Rom. 1:18-20).

Revelation is a datum from which one must begin and so the adequate teacher does not devote himself to an endless exercise in trying to convince the student of what is the case. Unless the student has already consented to that, education, as such, cannot begin. The teacher ought not try to coerce or seduce the student into the truth. Rather, he must simply witness to it.

Any competent thinker must apprehend that existence has certain basic structures. This fundamental insight disposes him to <u>believe</u> that the world is essentially a cosmos and not a chaos; and from this he infers that the world is an intelligible order - with the reservation that his finite mind is unable to grasp this order in every respect. Intellect, when not forced to serve a perverse will and appetite, can not let him down in this primary affirmation. Intellect is coerced by truth. Unless corrupted by other faculties it must receive what is the case, namely, what exists. On this account, given normal intelligence, and all other factors being equal, if one still can not receive truth it is because he <u>will</u> not. Thus Christianity has always asserted that sin lies first in the will and only consequentially in the understanding.

The religious thinker working within the Western tradition must ask whether the belief that the world is an intelligible order conforms to Biblical thought. The answer to this is found clearly, simply, yet profoundly in Genesis 1-3, appropriately the first three chapters of the first of the books entitled the Books of Moses.

The generic traits of existence are three and these are expressed in polar structure: 1) the infinite and finite, 2) the eternal and temporal, 3) freedom and necessity. It is helpful to follow this Scriptural account in the order in which it unfolds. This will require that the infinite and finite be taken up first.

I

The story of Creation in Genesis I is distinguished, among other things, for its presenting creation in her radiance. The overwhelming emphasis is upon form. The bounds of every creature after its kind are set. It is a hymn to divinely ordered limit. It is not as some have thought, a paean to progress. A serial progression there is, from the first creature called into being, namely, light to the acme of creation, man. But the order is essentially qualitative, not quantitative. There is no endless proliferation and diffusion. Creation is marked clearly by a beginning and a term, an origin and a consummation. The series of creatures called into being begins with light, the simple and maximally diffuse, and concludes with man, the creature who is representatively comprehensive and maximally combined.

Since no creature has constituted itself primordially, it is bound to express its dependent nature: even procreatively, each creature "after his kind." The radical point here has nothing to do with arguments against secular biological theory. It is concerned in something far more fundamental, namely the "nature" of the creature as such. Thus St. Paul speaks of God who calls things which are not yet in existence as though they already were (Rom. 4:17). The creature bounded by the Boundless, created from nothing, has no self-sufficient being from itself nor any in the divine essence, for God was under no necessity whatever to create. Creation is simply a free act of God's will and not a work of His nature. Since creation has undergone passage from not-being into being it cannot on that account be coeternal with God. The ontological limits of the creature are given to it in advance by power infinitely and qualitatively other than the creature's own. This requires the creature to occupy a station in the hierarchy of Creation, a position which it is powerless

to alter in the slightest degree for it has no resources by which to constitute itself as such, in being.

Where, then, does Genesis 1 locate man in the order of creation? Like every other creature he is bounded on the one hand by his origin, his beginning, and on the other by his consummation, his proper end. He is essentially distinguished from other creatures in that only he is created directly in the image of God. He is functionally distinguished from them as their divinely commissioned ruler (v.28). Though created as the consummation of the finite order he remains bounded by the Boundless. Made in the image of God he has the formal condition of freedom, the faculty of choice; and while the content of that image is man's participation by grace in the divine life (II Peter 1:4), neither of these gifts can assimilate him to the divine essence. He is placed between two orders, the divine and the creaturely with a vocational responsibility toward both. Archetypally he is a cosmic sacrifice, the one whose role is to mediate the created order toward God and the divine energies toward the creature. Christianity holds that this divine-human office has been historically accomplished in the life of Christ Jesus and has been given a definite statement in the Epistle to the Hebrews.

That man so stationed in the world has nonetheless no power primordially to constitute himself in the world does not give him license to conclude that reason has no adequate role to play in this recognition. On the contrary, the comprehensive and magnificent structure of the vision in Genesis 1 is precisely the point from which reason must make her adequate journey as the handmaiden who accompanies faith.

We must first believe so that we may come to understand since in duly ordering priorities among activities of the spiritual life faith outranks understanding. But in man faith is never constitutionally independent of the understanding. How could it be otherwise when in the first and great commandment we are commanded to love the Lord our God with all our mind? (Mark 12:30).

Clearly then, Scripture teaches unequivocally that the world is a cosmos, not a chaos and further commands us to believe it, i.e., to consent to it as the case without a conclusive demonstration of that both in advance and in every respect. If one will make such a radical act of trust, of belief, he will come to understand his station in the world and will not be at a loss to answer God's first question to man: "Adam, where art thou?" He will know.

II

It is one thing to discover the truth of Genesis 1 but quite another to accept it. Already, pressing forward relentlessly, comes now the second act in the cosmic drama. Genesis 2 confronts man with the question: Will you abide in the Abiding?

Genesis 2 brings into the foreground man's relation to the next basic structure of existence, namely, that of the eternal and the temporal. Whereas Genesis 1 locates man in Power and covers him with the Almighty, the succeeding story of creation situates man within Law and shows him subject to the divine Sovereignty. God is called in this chapter the Lord God. The cosmic structural splendor and benevolent amplitude of the first chapter are much in the background in this one. Death is spoken of for the first time. Emphasis on station is replaced by concern for quality of passage; and, with that shift in scene, world yields the stage to soul and cosmos to psyche.

Genesis 2 has nothing in it of the aesthetic optimism so characteristic of the first Chapter where the goodness of things refers to their fitness within an organic whole. Yet in both chapters, man's task is commanded and clearly described. A careful reading of them should dispel for all time the näive notion that some passively paradisal utopia constituted man's primordial environment. From the beginning man has been made for activity - for ruling, filling and subduing the earth (1:28) and for guarding and cultivating the Garden (2:15).

Three primary events in Chapter 2 point up directly man's inwardness: 1) the Lord God's prohibition (v.17) 2) man's naming every living creature (v.19) 3) the making of woman from a rib taken out of man (v.21-22).

1) The prohibition. This is the creation story's central event for grounding an adequate grasp of the human condition. It interrupts radically the immediacy of the communion between God and man and actualizes instantly for man the infinite qualitative distance between the Creator and creature, the sovereign and subject. The occasion for human despair, for angst, is fully actualized. But an occasion for disfunction does not coerce it; and precisely on that account classical theology has always insisted that man ought not to have disobeyed the divine prohibition.

How shall we explain man's sinful response to the divinely created occasion for that sin? By recognizing that the possibility of evil is the condition upon which finite good must freely actualize itself, within the limits of finite freedom. The possibility of evil is im-

plicit in the divine prohibition and this possibility lies in the nothing, the negative principle in created being. This principle must itself be negated consciously upon the instant it is consciously encountered or right action will not be actualized at all. There is no need for reason to prove or explain the possibility of evil since it is a principle, not a conclusion.

Contemporary theology (Tillich) has misguidedly attempted to explain the possibility of evil by claiming that there is a point in which Creation and the Fall coincide - thus making actualized creation and estranged existence identical. No interpretation could be more disastrous for an understanding of the relation between grace and free will. Revelation and not reason must help us here. Creation and the Fall are not coincident. Rather, the coincidence is between grace and human freedom. (Phil. 2:13) Neither determines the other. They cooperate in a union of two wills, the divine and the human. There is only one adequate human embodiment of this mystery - the sacramental life of loving prayer in which one abides always in God's love and God abides in him; so that in this respect, as He is so are we in this world. (I John 4:16-17)

What could be more conspicuous by its absence from Genesis 2 than any mention whatsoever of man's prayerful response in trust to that prohibition's rupture? Precisely at this point man should have come of age. Clearly, he did not because he would not. And Genesis 3 is not far off.

2) Man's naming every living creature. This event follows immediately upon the prohibition. God brought the creatures to man "and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name." (v.19) The power of intellect to abstract adequately the essence of another creature is clearly implied here. There is no following statement to the effect that man misnamed any, some or all of those God brought to him. Ancient man understood that a name signifies its bearer's nature or essential power. Both the activity and mystery of language are set forth in this text.

Language offers man the possibility of comprehending the Law of his own station in Creation. Man's language not only marks out space humanly but halts the mindless transition from past to present, and from present to future. The name of a thing abides. It cannot be reduced to the temporal trajectory and numberless accidents of a thing's career. Language discloses the signature of the Abiding both within and without all those things which are forever coming to be and passing away.

Man undertakes the task of naming creatures. He does this prior to the Fall. This reveals a responsible human consciousness already active prior to the Fall. Contemporary theologians, philosophers and psychoanalysts who interpret the Fall honorifically as the necessary prelude to free man from the prison of dreaming innocence seem not to have attended closely to the text nor to have considered the moral significance of language.

3) The making of woman from the rib of man. The creation of man is not complete until woman is brought forth. The other creatures, though named by man, are necessary but not sufficient for the functional objectification of himself. Without woman man would have remained a prisoner within his own subjectivity.

The gift of language and the bisexual structure of man bring his consciousness to functional maturity. The academically popular alternative to this interpretation presupposes that man's consciousness could not mature without his first asserting his finite freedom over against his Creator, i.e. man required willingly to disorder his relation to God and the cosmos or remain forever in an arrested development.

On the contrary, it is clear that God Himself undertook to initiate and bear first that psychological distance necessary between any two or more beings if they are to realize either friendship or estrangement. Otherwise, how shall we account for 1) the Creator's initiating the prohibition followed by 2) His solicitude in observing that it is not good for man to be alone and 3) His undertaking next to find and then make a companion for the one who is now alone? In each instance the initiative is God's. The psychological distance remains - as it must, if man is to go on growing as a person - but it is brought to functional use as the necessary condition for actualizing communion between friends or estrangement between aliens. There is no basis whatsoever in the story to support the notion that man had deliberately to make himself a stranger in the world in order to achieve a greater good.

When woman is presented to him, man experiences the company of his own kind, and the first rudiment of human sociality. At this point the developing cosmic social structure includes 1) God, 2) man as completed, 3) other finite creatures. However, full social intercourse has not yet been actualized. Company has been established. Society, as the ordered reciprocal activity between at least three persons has still to be presented.

III

Genesis 3 begins with an astonishing event. Man is directly addressed by his creaturely environment through the initiative of the serpent, itself a wild, not a domestic creature. The creature speaks first, and to woman. There is nothing inherently wrong with the serpent's first addressing humankind. It is one of the essential features of the world that things address man in their own way. But he is responsible for answering them correctly, i.e., in full awareness of his vocational dignity and his own creaturely limit. The drama of the social and personal encounter between man as a whole and his environment introduces the religious significance of the third structure of existence, freedom and necessity.

The stable relation between God the Unchanging (Jas. 1:17) and the creature as mutable (IICor. 3:18) is presented unequivocally in the story of the Fall of man. Finite freedom is actualized as a strict unity of possibility and necessity. It consists in the capacity to choose freely and to imagine a possibility for itself and others. Such an imagined possibility may or may not conform to the inner necessity of the human creature itself. Human imagination if so disordered by the will can disregard the essential creaturely limit in human being or vocation or both.

The woman falls through choosing to actualize sheer fantasy (Gen. 3:6). Like every creature she is suspended between the inner necessity of her nature and the lure of appetite. As human she conjures with imagination a possibility made plausible by belief in the serpent's declaration of God's alleged deception and vulnerability. She has to choose between two conflicting beliefs; either she believes God obediently or the serpent opportunistically.

This introduces what for our time is a staggering and unwelcome thought: there are just some things that in the practical order ought not to be known. What are they? Whatever things are inimical to right action at the time, such as the actualized consequences of a wrong action which ought not to be taken. Finitude cannot have it both ways in the same place, at the same time, with the same person, in the same way toward the same end.

The woman chooses to actualize her fantasy rather than, for the love and sake of God to hold obediently to her necessary creaturely limit. There remains always one potentiality that we should never

actualize - no, not to all eternity. This is another unwelcome thought for our time during which so many are bent on the notion that man is a bundle of potentialities driving toward their actualization. It is fatally overlooked that there is a potentiality in us that must be negated rather than realized.

What is the movement required of the human creature when tempted to nihilate freely the divine imperative? It is a double movement, a double negation which consists in our refusal to refuse the divine will. This double movement would be unnecessary had we primordially the power to create the good by divine fiat. Mysteriously, however, we possess the initiative for withdrawing into the nothing from which we were called into being. We must not give ourselves airs that exercising that initiative frustrates the will of God, as Creator. Yet it does indeed frustrate our conscious communion with God and so destroys our realizing our divine-human destiny.

This freely willed failure to attend singlemindedly to the divine imperative, this refusal to "wait upon God", actualizes the nothing by corrupting from the human side the relationship between creature and Creator. The demonic suffering which this entails causes us to recognize evil as not only a privation but also as positive. "Something" which is no - thing then erodes the otherwise glorious passage of being. Maritain puts this well in commenting on John 15:5, "'For without me, you can do nothing'; which is to say, 'Without me you can make that thing which is nothing'."

Sartre says that man's freedom consists in his power to say no. Unfortunately he does not go on to say that man is under primordial obligation to say, by grace, no to his own no. This is the double negation available to the human creature by which he obeys the necessary limit within himself and becomes established in the freedom of the children of God.

When one not only "sees" this changeless relation between the Unchanging and the mutable but also consents to it as the case eternally (I Peter 1:25) he will, like Job, repent. He will begin modestly to make his return to the beginning of beginnings; and will not vainly take flight into the endless vagaries of thought which when ungrounded on right belief soon loses the very intelligibility by which the human mind is graced.

Only such a penitent comes finally to be at home in the world. Upon the instant he confesses his belief and renounces all pretensions to supercede his Creator, behold, he is granted the vision of an intelligible world in which he finds his place, his passage and his

consummation.

Perhaps Tennyson's grasp of that splendor prompted these first two stanzas he wrote for his epitaph:

Sunset and evening star,
And one clear call for me!
And may there be no moaning of the bar,
When I put out to sea,

But such a tide as moving seems asleep,
Too full for sound and foam,
When that which drew from out the boundless deep
Turns again home.