

Parashat Bereshit

Beresheet opens with the great liturgical hymn of Creation. It is followed by what appears to be a duplicate account of the same event. It seems to me that the second account was not written by the author of the first. The style is different. In chapter one, there is a magnificent restraint in the description of God's creative arts. It is brilliant, but a sketch. God utters His divine fiat and His will is done.

By contrast, the second Creation story has detailed story-telling. In 2:7, God moulds man like a potter; in 2:8, plants a garden; in 3:8, He strolls it in the evening; in 3:21, He makes clothes for Adam & Eve. The story-order of the various items differ. The first account begins in 1:3 with light and ends in 1:26 with the creation of man. The second begins with the creation of man in 2:7 and ends with that of woman in 2:22.

Those who take an interest in these matters suggest there are four strands in the first five books of the Bible, interwoven to form one whole. They contend that two are present in today's portion - an older strand from the 9thc.BCE, the J or Jahwist, and a younger source from roughly the 5thc.BCE, the P or Priestly strand. Thus, they say, the liturgical poem in chapter one is P, and the older traditional narrative in chapters two and three is J.

Whatever, this is serious stuff. We cannot dismiss the second Creation story as an old fairy tale, or merely as a primitive attempt to answer such questions as: Why the world? Why are there men and women? Why do we wear clothes? The second account is clearly meant to be regarded as a sequel to the first, and not as a repetition of it. A careful read of it shows that it is far from a naive account of the origin of things, produced by a primitive people. It is as highly theological and profound in its insights as is the first story. The key point is that having painted the picture in Gen.1 of the world as God meant it to be, the Bible now goes on in Gen.2-3 to paint a picture of the world as it is. Gen. 2 & 3 require careful and thoughtful study. They are a treasure house of insights into human nature, our relations with one another and with God. Casual reading will reveal little.

Adam and Eve is not just the story of the world's first man and woman and what happened to them, but also that of every man and woman since human life began. The Hebrew words for Adam and Eve mean Man and Life, so perhaps if this wise old theologian had been writing today he might have entitled these two chapters: 'The Story of Mr. And Mrs. Everyman.' Let us remember that this is our story. Adam and Eve are you and I.

There are countless subtleties in this portrayal. In Gen.2:15, we are shown God's good earth, the Creator's handiwork, with man & woman charged with the task of developing it and keeping it in good order. We all have a part to play in this one - think just of plastic alone! The whole world's resources lie open to them. Communion with God is theirs (the tree of life, Gen.2:9), as is the whole gamut of human experiences. Men and women may select from the field of experience what they will. Freedom of choice is open to them. Therein lies the danger.

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The ultimate standards of good and evil are not theirs to settle. They must recognise their limits as creatures under authority, and that it is God's prerogative to determine what is right and what is wrong. If they usurp it, consequences are fatal, as Gen.2:17 indicates. The temptation to set our own standards of right and wrong and to run things our way are irresistible. Pride, in Gen.3:5, made Adam & Eve want to be on the same level as God. Disaster follows. Human relations are tarnished (3:7); the world becomes a hostile place (3:17-19); worst of all, a barrier divides man from God (3:24).

Whether you accept the traditional theological doctrine of the Fall or no, is your choice. Surely the truth that the Bible is conveying to us is that as long as there have been men and women on earth, they have used their freedom the wrong way, by putting themselves at the centre instead of God. We, made in the image of God, constantly frustrate Him by not having the right relationship with Him. This is as equally true today as it was in the days of Adam and Eve. The Bible tells us so, fairy story or no! We repeat in our own lives every day the story of the Fall; our human pride and our separation from God are often too painfully real to allow us to forget them.

Note how adroitly our evasion of responsibility is handled in Gen.3:12-13. The man blames the woman and the woman blames the serpent. Indeed, the man practically accuses God: "It was You who gave me the woman in the first place!" Men have always tried to shuffle out of responsibility for their failures - just look at the current crop of politicians. We blame our instincts, our environment, our parents, our wives or our neighbours, and if all else fails, we can always blame God. The old writer saw that there was a tragic side to the beauty of the earth, but maintains that this is not in the purpose of the Creation. It is an intrusion into God's plan. The plight of the serpent and its enmity with man, as illustrated in Gen.3:14-15, by which he symbolises the whole mystery of man's relation to the natural world, the suffering of dumb creatures, the groaning and travailing of the whole creation as Paul puts it later, in Rom.8:22, is somehow the result of a cosmic breakdown. Not only human kind but nature itself is in constant rebellion against God. Pain and cruelty, disease and decay, are no part of a world which the Creator saw to be "very good."

Our present technological age, with all its ingenuity, is still out of harmony with the world and with its neighbour. We do not need to look far in the international, social or economic field to find the curse of Adam is still in active play. Unerringly, this old biblical tale of the Fall illuminates our contemporary scene. Gen.3:15 strikes a deep note. It may have been fanciful for early commentators to see in the words 'it shall bruise your heel', a promise of the coming of Yeshua, the seed of a woman, who would triumph over Satan and destroy the power of evil. However, whatever was in the ancient scribe's mind at the time, we are right to think that with the coming of Yeshua and His victory over evil, the victory is won. These old words have come strangely and wonderfully true. As Romans 16:20 says, "The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet."

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The Bible pulls no punches. It insists that we see ourselves as we are and that we should see God as He is. We must see ourselves as oft-times stupid beings, capable of every crime from simple wilfulness to murder. We must understand that 'God is no benevolent cosmic sponge, prepared to wipe away our worst excesses with a benevolent tolerance.' God hates sin and will not gloss over it. Through these ancient accounts He lets us know this. We are not under condemnation because once upon a time the first man and woman failed God, but because we ourselves are Adam and Eve and their failure is ours. What they deserve we deserve, but for the love of God.

We will not get everything we want in this life. Not every dream will come true and some harsh realities will have to be faced. But God promises to be our strength and stay with us. We have His love and Holy Spirit within us, to guide our way. Recall that the fresh realisation of God's love and faithfulness was enough to make the musical director Asaph say, "earth has nothing I desire besides You." (Ps.73:25). What are the ephemeral pleasures of wealth and fame compared to the unchanging eternal love of God? That is why Asaph cried, "God ismy portion for ever" (Ps.73:26). So should we, if we are truly in faith.