

ECHOES OF GOD: JOURNEYING WITH THE WORD OF GOD



Week Two: Genesis

As the Hebrew slaves journey towards the Promised Land, they reflect further on their experience of liberation. The People of *"the God"* look backward to the beginning of things and forward to where they might be travelling next. Gradually, they come to realise *"the God"* who is *"I am"* must also be the source of all that is, and its ultimate end. This is an inspired understanding going beyond all that the religions around them taught about their local gods.

As they walk through difficult places, some very desert-like, they imagine *"the God"*, their Creator, back in a beautiful original garden, perhaps inspired by the oases they hope for as they cross the desert. There *"the God"* chose to walk in the cool of the evening amidst the peaceful creatures, in the company of man and his companion.

Genesis has two creation accounts which themselves demonstrate how the people of *"the God"* again and again look backward and forward trying to understand who *"I am"* is, and what he wants of them. At the beginning of Mark's Gospel, there is an echo of this as Mark thinks of Jesus alone in the wilderness with just the animals and the angels for company. He is thinking of Jesus as a new Adam starting to renew the relationship between *"the God"* and humanity.

The story echoes throughout the Bible until the very last book where the original paradise is recreated as a Garden City. Here at the end of time, the God will again dwell in the midst of his people in a renewed Jerusalem (Revelation Chapter 21).

Genesis 2:4-2:25 - The Creation.

Such was the story of heaven and earth as they were created. At the time when Yahweh God made earth and heaven 5. there was as yet no wild bush on the earth nor had any wild plant yet sprung up, for Yahweh God had not sent rain on the earth, nor was there any man to till the soil. 6. Instead, water flowed out of the ground and watered all the surface of the soil. 7. Yahweh God shaped man from the soil of the ground and blew the breath of life into his nostrils, and man became a living being. 8. Yahweh God planted a garden in Eden, which is in the east, and there he put the man he had fashioned. 9. From the soil, Yahweh God caused to grow every kind of tree, enticing to look at and good to eat, with the tree of life in the middle of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. 10. A river flowed from Eden to water the garden, and from there it divided to make four streams. 11. The first is named the Pishon, and this winds all through the land of Havilah where there is gold. 12. The gold of this country is pure; bdellium and cornelian stone are found there. 13. The second river is named the Gihon, and this winds all through the land of Cush. 14. The third river is named the Tigris, and this flows to the east of Ashur. The fourth river is the Euphrates. 15. Yahweh God took the man and settled him in the garden of Eden to cultivate and take care of it. 16. Then Yahweh God gave the man this command, 'You are free to eat of all the trees in the garden. 17. But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you are not to eat; for, the day you eat of that, you are doomed to die.' 18. Yahweh God said, 'It is not right that the man should be alone. I shall make him a helper.' 19. So from the soil Yahweh God fashioned all the wild animals and all the birds of heaven. These he brought to the man to see what he would call them; each one was to bear the name the man would give it. 20. The man gave names to all the cattle, all the birds of heaven and all the wild animals. But no helper suitable for the man was found for him. 21. Then, Yahweh God made the man fall into a deep sleep. And, while he was asleep, he took one of his ribs and closed the flesh up again forthwith. 22. Yahweh God fashioned the rib he had taken from the man into a woman, and brought her to the man. 23. And the man said: This one at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh! She is to be called Woman, because she was taken from Man. 24. This is why a man leaves his father and mother and becomes attached to his wife, and they become one flesh. 25. Now, both of them were naked, the man and his wife, but they felt no shame before each other."

(The New Jerusalem Bible).

As they journey towards the Promised Land, the People of God ponder "*the God*" who has called Moses to lead them. They know the ancient stories about Abram and Sara who had set out in search of the one God, but for so long they have been surrounded by the gods of the Egyptians and their temples and priests. This God "*I am who I am*" is very different from all that they have known. Sometimes they moan against Moses, and the journey that "*the God*" is leading them on. Yet in all their trials, this God stands by them leading them with smoke by day and fire by night, providing food (*mannah*) and water (even from the desert rocks at Meribah and Massah), and safety.

As they sit around their fires in the evenings, they ponder their God. Slowly, their inspired thinkers begin to see patterns in their God's engagement. They realise "*the God*" is not like the local gods of Egypt and Canaan and they begin to see the implication that "*the God*" is the Creator of all. Their inspired storytellers shape a story from within the world they know to express this daring revelation. This is the world of the Nile delta with its red clay soil *adamah* and the harsh desert. A wilderness which is searing hot by day and freezing cold at night. There it is easy to get lost and die for lack of water, sustenance, or shade.

So they ponder what did God intend when God created? They make a brave statement:

"When the Lord God made the earth and the heavens... then the Lord God formed the man out of the dust of the ground and blew into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being." (New American Bible Revised Edition)

So much is going on here as God speaks to the people through the words of the inspired storyteller. *Adamah* is the same clay that the oppressed Hebrew slaves turned into bricks to build Pharaoh's pyramids day after day. Here, the very stuff of oppression *adamah*, is turned, by the hands of God, into the living creature *Adam* with whom God chooses to speak and share life.

And where does God place Adam? In a garden in Eden in the fertile plain of Sumeria. How different from the desert places they were crossing! God plants a *paradise*, which is the Persian word for a pleasure garden, for God's own delight. God places the human being within it. And what do you seek as you cross a desert? An oasis, with water, trees and vegetation. God creates Adam as the first gardener in paradise to nurture this oasis and to learn from it. Then God asks Adam not to tamper with the Tree of the Knowledge of good and evil because its knowledge is destructive, and death dealing (Genesis 2:16). At this point, Adam is God's innocent gardener and friend. For companionship for Adam, God creates the animals and invites Adam to name them to complete them. At this point "*the God*", man, and the natural created world are in a simple relationship of mutuality. But the animals are not an adequate helpmate for man. So God takes a rib from the sleeping man, in Hebrew *ish* and creates *ishah* wo-man. They are naked and without shame, delighting in their simple being together.

Well we all know what happens next. Another creature, the serpent, tempts them to aspire beyond their beautiful lives, to be dis-satisfied. However, as they gain the knowledge of good and evil by actually committing evil and breaking the law, they unravel the beautiful, ordered reality that the Creator had made them capable of enjoying. They lose the simplicity of their relationship with God, with each other, with the creatures and the very earth itself. This inspired story still speaks powerfully to us today. We are aware of the consequences of human arrogance and greed in our relationships with each other, with the creatures with which we share our planet and with the soil, the forests and plants and oceans we have polluted. The beautiful balance and order that God brought forth is compromised more than ever in our day.

The new people of God moving towards a divinely Promised Land would try to build a land where the vision of the divinely inspired storyteller could become real again. For them the Creation accounts became prophecies of what life could be, in a renewed and dynamic, relationship with their mysterious God : "*I am who I am*" (Exodus.3:14).

After some time, as they began to build that society, they would re-imagine the Creation in more detail and this eventually becomes the very first part of Genesis and of the Hebrew Scriptures (Genesis 1 to 2:3). But, the storytellers there, perhaps Priests from the Temple in Jerusalem, now see God's creative work in a holy week of seven days with morning and evening, just as the daily life of the Temple in Jerusalem was defined by Morning and Evening prayer. In that story, the resting of God on the seventh day hallows the whole work of Creation. The Sabbath rest will help the people to remember their calling to imagine God in the midst of Creation and to lead it to its fulfilment, yet that is quite another story.

Throughout the two accounts and the rest of the book of Genesis, each section is introduced with the phrase "*This is the Story of...*". The inspired narrators invite us to enter into the stories to which each generation can bring its experiences of joy and sadness, peace and war, fear and hope. These texts, as God's inspired word, can re-shape our awareness, and invite us to return to the vision that the Creator continues to offer us. The vision so beautifully echoed in the later words of the Prophet Micah:

"...he has told each of you what is good and what it is the Lord requires of you: to act justly, to love tenderly, and to walk humbly with your God." (Micah 6:8).

Again, and again, the books of the Bible will echo and reflect the great themes of Genesis. Despite the story of human culpability for sin and the violence of our world, the Bible will still end with a re-reading of this story in an ultimate future. There in the last book of the Bible, Revelation, will be the final vision of that Garden City. A new paradise, flowing with water and blessed with myriad trees where God will indeed live in the midst of a peaceable people. Again, and again, the Scriptures remind us that the original blessing of God's creativity is always greater than the original human sin, with all its real but limited effects. May it be so!

Reflection

Take a little time to re-read the creation account.

Can you see what it is that holds you in peace with those around you, with the plants and creatures, and the whole planet?

Can you identify how this peace sometimes breaks down? What is the suggested remedy?



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