BIBLICAL LITERALISM: CONSTRICTING THE COSMIC DANCE

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> Woe to him who strives with his Maker'
> an earthen vessel with the potter!
> Does the clay say to him who fashions it,
> "What are you making?"
> or "Your work has no handles?" (Isa. 45:9)

With all the decades of scientific research and biblical scholarship that have intervened since the Scopes "monkey trail" in 1925, one might have thought that the issues were by now passe. Yet the recent wave of school-board hearings, legislative bills and court cases suggest that literalism is a persistent phenomenon. Indeed, we may be seeing only the top of the turnip.

The literalist mentality does not manifest itself only in conservative churches, private - school enclaves, television programs of the evangelical right, and a considerable amount of Christian bookstore material; one often finds a literalist understanding of Bible and faith being assumed by those who have no religious inclinations, or who are avowedly antireligious in sentiment. Even in educated circles the possibility of more sophisticated theologies of creation is easily obscured by burning straw effigies of biblical literalism.

But the problem is even more deep - rooted. A literalist imagination or lack of imagination - pervades contemporary culture. One of the more dubious successes of modern science - and of its attendant spirits technology, historiography and mathematics - is the suffusion of intellectual life with a prosaic and pedantic mind - set. One may observe this feature in almost any college classroom, not only in religious studies, but within the humanities in general. Students have difficulty in thinking, feeling and expressing themselves symbolically.

The problem is, no doubt, further amplified by the obviousness and banality of most of the television programming on which the present generation has been weaned and reared. Not only is imagination a strain; even to imagine what a symbolic world is like is difficult. Poetry is turned into prose, truth into statistics, understanding into facts, education into note - taking, art into criticism, symbols into signs, faith into beliefs. That which cannot be listed, outlined, dated, keypunched, reduced to thought or experienced.

Our situation calls to mind a backstage interview with Anna Pavlova, the dancer. Following an illustrious and moving performance, she was asked the meaning of the dance. She replied, "If I could say it, do you think I should have danced it?" To give dance a literal meaning would be to reduce dancing to something else. It would lose its capacity to involve the whole person. And one would miss all the subtle nuances and delicate shadings and rich poyvalences of the dance itself.

The remark has its parallel in religion. The early ethnologist R.R. Marett is noted for his dictum that "religion is not so much thought out as danced out." But even when thought out, religion is focused in the verbal equivalent of the dance: myth, symbol and metaphor. To insist on assigning to it a literal, one - dimensional meaning is to shrink and stifle and distort the significance. In the words of E.H.W. Myerstein, "Myth is my tongue, which means not that I cheat, but stagger in a light too great to bear."

Religious expression trembles with a sense of the inexpressible mystery, a mystery which nevertheless addresses us in the totality of our being.

The literal imagination is univocal. Words mean one thing, and one thing only. They don't bristle with meaning and possibilities; they are bald, clean - shaven. Literal clarity and simplicity, to be sure, offer a kind of security in a world (or Bible) where otherwise issues seem incorrigibly complex, ambiguous and muddy. But it is a false security, a temporary bastion, maintained by dogmatism and misguided loyalty. Literalism pays a high price for the hope of having firm and unbreakable handles attached to reality. The result is to move in the opposite direction from religious symbolis, emptying symbols of their amplitude of meaning and power, reducing the cosmic dance to a calibrated discussion.

One of the ironies of biblical literalism is that it shares so largely in the reductionist and literalist spirit of the age. It is not nearly as conservative as it supposes. It is modernistic, and it sells its symbolic birthright for a mess of tangible pottage. Biblical materials and affirmations - in this case the symbolism of Creator and creation - are treated as though of the same order and the same literary gere as scientific and historical writing. "I believe in God the Father Almighty" becomes a chronological issue, and "Maker of heaven and earth" a technological problem.

To suggest that the first chapters of Genesis ought to be read in the classroom as an alternative to evolutionary theories presupposes that these chapters are yielding something comparable to scientific theories and historical reconstructions of empirical data. Interpreting the Genesis accounts faithfully, and believing in their reliability and significance as divine revelation, is understood to mean taking them literally as history, as chronology, as scientific truth. In the words of Henry Morris, a leading "scientific creationist: "The Bibical record, accepted in its natural and literal sense, gives the only scientific and satisfyling account of the origins of things... The creation account is clear, definite, sequential and matter - - fact, giving every apperance of straightfoward historical narrative" (The Remarkable Birth of Planet Earth (Bethany, 1978), pp.iv,84).

Two further ironies result from such literalism. The biblical understanding of creation is not being pitted against evolutionary theories, as is supposed; rather, evolutionary theories are being juxtaposed with literalist theories of biblical interpreation. Doing this is not even like trying to campare oranges and orangutans. Even if evolution is only a scientific theory of interpretation posing as biblical fact, as the creationists argue, creationism is only a religious theory of biblical interpreation posing as biblical fact. And to compount the confusions, these biblical "facts" are then treated as belonging to the same level of discourse and family of concerns as scientific facts. and therefore supportable by scientific data, properly interpreted. Yet if one is unable to follow all these intertwinings, let alone bow the knee, a veritable Pandora's box of dire fates awaits:

> Belief in evolution is a necessary component of atheism, pantheism, and all other systems that reject the sovereing authority of an omnipotent persoanl God. (It) has historically been used by their leaders to justify a long succession of evil systems - including fascism, communism, anarchism, nazism, occultism, and many others. (It) leads normally to selfishness, aggressiveness, and fighting between groups, as well as animalistic attitudes and behavior by individuals (ibid., vii).

But the greatest irony is that the symbolic richness and power - the religious meaning - of creation are largely lost in the cloud of geological and paleontological dust stirred up in the confusion. If one were to speak of a hermeneutical fall, it would have to be the fall into literalism. Literalism diverts attention from, as well as flattening out, the symbolic depth and multidimensionality of the biblical texts. The literalist, instead of opening up the treasurehouse of symbolic imagination, digresses into more and more ingenious and fantastic attempts at defending literalism itself. Again and again the real issue turns out to be not belief in divine creativity but belief in a particular theory of Scripture, not faith but security. The divine word and work ought to have better handles!

Even among interpreters who do not identify with the literalism of the creationists, one often finds a sense of relief expressed in noting that the sequence of days in Genesis 1, if viewed as eons, offers a rough approximation to modern reconstructions of the evolution of matter and life. It is a very rough approximation, considering such difficulties as that the sun, moon and stars were not created until the fourth "eon," following the earth and vegetation in the third. And even if all rough correlations could be made smooth by convoluted arguments about cloud covers and the like, the two Genesis accounts themselves, taken as chronologies, do not agree. In Genesis 2, for example, Adam is created before plants and animals, and Eve after. Still, no matter how close the approximations, the entire line of argument is a lapse into literalism and its assumption that this account is in some way comparable to a scientific, historical one.

A case in point is the supposition that the numbering of days in Genesis is to be understood in an arithmetical sense, The use of numbers in ancient religious text was usually numerological rather than numerical; that is, their symbolic value was more important that their secular value as counters. To deal with numbers in a religious context as an actual numbering of days, or eons, is an instance of the way in which a literal reading loses the symobolic richness of the text.

While the conversion of numerology to arithmetic was essential for the rise of modern science, historiography and mathematics, in which numbers had to be neutralized and emptied of any symbolic suggestion in order to be utilized, the result is that numerological symbols are reduced to signs. The principal surviving exception is the number 13, which still holds a strange power over Fridays, and over the listing of floors in hotels and highrises.

Biblical literalism, in its treatment of the days of creation, subsititutes a modern arithmetical reading for the original symbolic one. Not only does the completion of creation is six days correlate with and support the religious calendar and Sabbath observance (if the Hebrews had a five - day work week, the account would have read differently), but also be seventh day of rest employs to the full the symbolic meaning of the number seven as wholeness, plenitude, completion.

The religious meaning of the number seven is derived in part from the numerological combination of the three zones of the cosmos (heaven, earth, underwold) seen vertically, and the four directions, or zones, of the cosmos seen horizontally. Thus seven (adding three and four) and twelve (mutiplying them) are recurrent biblical symbols of totality and perfection. The liturgically repeated phrases "And God saw that it was good," and the final capping phrase "And behold it was very good", are paralleled and underlined by being placed in a structure climaxed by a seventh day.

A parallelism of two sets of three days is also being employed, with the second set of days populating the first : light and darkness (day one) are popluated by the greater and lesser lights (four); firmament and water (two) by birds and fish (five); earth and vegetation (three) by land animals and humans (six). Two sets of three days, each with two types of created phenomena, equaling 12, thus permitted the additional association with the corresponding numerological symbol of wholeness and fulfillment. The totality of nature is created by God, and is to be affirmed in a hymn of celebration and praise for its "very goodness."

While it is true that the biblical view of creation sanctifies time and nature as created by God - and therefore good - it does not follow that the creation accounts as such are to be understood chronologically or as natural history. And while it is true that history is seen as the context and vehicle of divine activity, it does not follow that the creation accounts are to be interpreted as history, or even prehistory. One of the symbolic functions of the creation accounts themselves is to give positive value to time and to provide the staging for history. They are no more historical than the set and scenery of a play are part of the narrative of the drama, or than the order in which an artist fills in the pigment and detail of a painting is part of the significance of the painting.

The symbolic function of creation in valuing time and history becomes clearer when the Genesis accounts are compared with myths whose purpose is to legitimate cyclical time (as in the Babylonian myth of the primeval conquest of Tiamat by Marduk, alluded to in Genesis 1:2) or to those in which time itself is a negative aspect of a fallen order (as in Plato's myth of the fall of the soul, or similar myths favored by Hindu and Buddist mysticism).

When one looks at the myths of surrounding cultures, in fact, no senses that the current debate over creationism would have seemed very str[illegible]e, if not unitelligible, to the writers and readers of Genesis. Scientific an[illegible] historical issues in their modern form were not issues at all. Science and natural history as we know them simply did not exist, even though they owe a debt to the positive value given to space, time, matter and history by the biblical affirmation of creation.

What did exist - what very much existed - and what pressed on Jewish faith from all sides, and even from within, were the religious problems of idolatry and syncretism. The critical question in the creation account of Genesis 1 was polytheism versus monotheism. That was the burning issue of the day, not some issue which certain Americans 2,500 years later in the midst of a scientific age might imagine that it was. And one of the reasons for its being such a burning issue was that Jewish monotheism was such a unique and hard - won faith. The temptations of idolatry and sycretism were everywhere. Every nation surrounding Israel, both great and small, was polytheistic; and many Jews themselves held - as they always had - similar inclinations. Hence the frequent prophetic diatribes against altars in high places, the Canaanite cult of Baal, and "whoring after other gods."

Read through the eyes of the people who wrote it, Genesis 1 would seem very different from the way most people today would tend to read it - including both evolutionists who may dismiss it as a prescientific account of origins, and creationists who may try to defend it as the true science and literal history of origins. For most peopls in the ancient world the various regions of nature were divine. Sun, moon and stars were gods. There were sky gods and earth gods and water gods, There were gods of light and darkness, rivers and vegetation, animals and fertility. Though for us nature has been "demythologized" and "naturalized" - in large part because o[illegible]

this very passage of Scripture - for ancient Jewish faith a divinized nature posed a fundamental religious problem.

In addition, pharaohs, kings and heroes were oftn seen as sons of gods, or at least as special mediators between the divine and human spheres. The greatness and vaunted power and glory of the successive waves of empires that impinged on or conquered Israel (Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Persia) posed an analogous problem of idolatry in the human sphere.

In the light of this historical context it becomes clearer what Genesis 1 is undertaking and accomplishing: a radical and sweeping affirmation of monotheism vis - a - vis polytheism, syncretism and idolatry. Each day of creation takes on two principal categories of divinity in the pantheons of the day, and declares that these are not gods at all, but creatures - creations of the one true God who is the only one, without a second or third. Each day dismisses an additional cluster of deities, arranged in a cosmological and symmetrical order.

On the first day the gods of light and darkness are dismissed. On the second day, the gods of sky and sea. On the third day, earth gods and gods of vegetation. On the fourth day, sun, moon and star gods. The fifth and sixth days take away any associations with divinity form the animal kingdom. And finally human existence, too, is emptied of any intrinsic divinity - while at the same time all human beings, from the greatest to the least, and not just pharoahs, kings and heroes, are granted a divine likeness and mediation.

On each day of creation another set of idols is smashed. These, O Israel, are no gods at all - even the great gods and rulers of conquering superpowere. They are the creations of that transcendent One who is not to be confused with any piece of the furniture of the universe of creaturely habitation. The creation is good, it is very good, but it is not divine.

We are then given a futher clue concerning the polemical design of the passage when the final verse (2:4a) concludes: "These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created." Why the word "generations," especially if what is being offered is a chronology of days of creation? Now to polytheist and monotheist alike the word "generations" at this point would immediately call one thing to mind. If we should ask how these various divinities were related to one another in the pantheons of the day, the most common answer would be that they were related as members of a family tree. We would be given a genealogy, as in Hesiod's Theogony, where the great tangle of Greek gods and goddess were sorted out by generations. Ouranos begat Kronos; Kronos begat Zeus; Zeus begat Prometheus.

The egyptians, Assyrians and Babylonians all had their "generations of the gods." Thus the priestly account, which had begun with the majestic words, "In the begining God created the heavens and the earth, "now concludes over against all the impressive and colorful pantheons with their divine pedigrees - "These are the generations of the heavens and earth when they were created." It was a final pun on the concept of the divine family tree.

The fundamental question at stake, then, could not have been the scientific question of how things achieved their present form and by what processes, nor even the historical question about time periods and chronological order. The issue was idolatry, not science; syncretism, not natural history; theology, not chronologyl affirmation of faith in one transcendent God, not creationist or evolutionist theories of orgin. Attempting to be loyal to the Bible by turning the creation accounts into a kind of science or history is like trying to be loyal to the teachings of Jesus by arguing that the parables are actual historical events, and only reliable and trustworthy when taken literally as such.

If one really wishes to appreciate more fully the religious meaning of creation in Genesis 1, one should read not creationist or anticreationist diatribes but Isaiah 40. For the theology of Genesis 1 is essentially the same as the theology of Deutero-Isaiah. They are also both from the same time period, and therefore part of the same interpretive context. It was a time that had been marked, first, by the conquest of most of Palestine - save Jerusalem - by the Assyrians under Sennacherib (ca.701 B.C.). And a century later the Babylonians under Nebuchadnezzar had in turn conquered the Middle East, Palestine and even Jerusalem.

The last vestige of Jewish autonomy and Promised Land had been overrun. The Holy City had been invaded, the temple of Solomon destroyed, the city burned, and many of the people carried off into exile, leaving "the poorest of the land to be vine - dressers and plowmen" (II Kings 25:12). Those taken into Babylonian captivity, as well as those left behind, now had even greater temptations placed before them to abandon faith in their God, and to turn after other gods who were clearly more powerful and victorious.

Given the awesome might and splendor and triumphs of Assyria and then Babylon, was it not obvious that the shepherd - god of Israel was gut a local spirit, a petty tribal god who was hardly a match for the likes of Marduk, god of Babylon? Where was this god, or the people of his hand, or the land of his promise? Faith was hard and idolatry easy. And now a new and greater power, Persia, loomed on the horizon. Yet despite the littleness and powerlessness of a conquered people before the might and majesty of the great empires of the day, a prophet dared to stand forth and declare what Genesis 1 in its own way also declares:

> Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand,
> and marked off the heavens with a span,
> enclosed the dust of the earth in a measure
> and weighed the mountains in scales in a balance?
> Who has directed the spirit of the Lord,
> or as his counselor has instructed him? (Isaiah 40: 12,13)

Here too is a poetic affirmation which no literalism can reduce to its own scales and balances, and no symbolism or imagery exhaust.

> To whom then will you liken God, or what likeness compare with him?...
> Have you not known? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you
> from the beginning?
> Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth?
> It is he who sits above the circle of the earth,
> And its inhabitants are like grasshoppers;
> Who stretches out the heavens like a curtain,
> And spreads them like a tent to dwell in;
> Who brings princes to nought, and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing.
> (Isaiah 40: 21-23)

Had there been a controversy in the Babylonian public schools of the day, and had there been Babylonian public schools -- these would have been the issues in debate.