

Beginning Again: Unitarian Congregation of Niagara, 4 January 2004
By Michael Hornyansky

The Beginning I mean is the story that begins the Bible (Genesis, Chapters I-II-III), also called Creation (what it all began with). I've called my meditation Beginning Again, because it was composed for our first meeting of the New Year, and because I planned to take a close fresh look at the story. Readers who have only a vague memory of the text might find it useful to read over those chapters again, now, and see what new features they notice. For instance, does it shock you if I say we are dealing here with two stories, not one? Two stories about the beginning, surprisingly different from each other in scope, in what's stressed or passed over, in language and tone and also completeness. If you haven't already glimpsed that, you are not reading carefully. This is not a sin, or a cause for shame. Many people have difficulty in reading the Bible with their minds wide open - engaged, and alert. Having spent all my life showing students how to read and understand stories, I have a good notion of the problems they have to overcome. Let's have a quick look at them.

One problem is our own expectations. We were expecting one Creation story: why should there be two? Where is the Big Bang story we've heard so much about? Who's talking? What kind of world are we in? Expectations can ruin everything: we keep looking for what we expected, and if we don't find it we decide it's a poor story (but it's not the story's fault, it's ours). Here's an example, from what we call real life. We have all just come through the Christmas season together, which for religious folk puts angelic young boy-children in the spotlight.. We did our bit. We brought along to our Christmas meeting our son and his wife and their first child, just about one year old. He behaved very nicely, keeping very quiet and occasionally giving a shy smile. But that was in church. That night, at several points in that long night, our angel-child became a demon, howling his rage nonstop if everything didn't meet his expectations. Don't get me wrong: I am not blaming him for such behaviour. It's all he can manage, and if it gets results he'll go on doing it. A child has to be a complete egotist to start with, Me Me Me, or how will he survive? Nobody can blame him until he starts to see what the options are. (He already suspects what a smile can do: maybe now he can work out a strategy.)

Here is my point. Shortly after that meeting, and several of those nights, this angelic infant managed to infect both his ageing grandparents with a galloping version of stomach flu. In the course of a seven-hour wait at the Emergency Department, we learned a few things. The one I liked best came from a tired but amusing doctor, who advised us to face the facts: all small children, boys or girls, are not angels but walking and crawling hives of infection, including some infections that experienced old survivors have never met. And so are Pets. (That came a less of a shock; we owned a sheepdog once, or he owned us--a thorough fake in his guarding duties, and certainly an unending source of fleas and diseases.)

When it comes to the stories in the Bible, expectations take a different shape. If we are religious readers, the risk is that we 'know' in advance exactly what the story means, no matter what actually happens in it (we may not even notice what happens). If we are less

religious, or skeptical, or down-right Unitarian, we have the same difficulty in reverse form. We know this is the so-called Word of God, and since we have trouble accepting that idea, we expect pretty firmly that we won't find any sense in it. And with that expectation, of course we won't.

By the way --scientists and religious people are not so far apart as you may think. Consider: they both start from Facts. And what is a fact? A perception that cannot be disproved; or let's say, to play safe, a perception that has not been disproved so far. For many, many years it was an unchallenged fact that the sun moved round the earth; after all, it went down There, and came back up over Here, undamaged by several hours of darkness. And when someone set out to prove that the truth was the other way around, and people were suffering from a misperception (or a perception that stayed with us but couldn't be trusted), a lot of them, scientists as well as religious people, were seriously distressed. Some of them still are, and pay no attention to trouble-makers. (How many scientists stroll to the lab thinking Golly, I'm moving at what is it, 17000 mph, or km/h, and I'm still gonna be late for work?)

Another important thing about facts. They may be true, or on rare occasions turn out to be false; but they do not mean anything. Not by themselves. For the scientist, a fact means something when it is part of a framework, commonly featuring some kind of process and a result. This framework is called a hypothesis, or in larger cases a theory. For non-scientists (watch carefully), a fact begins to mean something when it is part of a framework--yes, usually a process of some kind, leading up to a result or ending. This framework is called a story, or sometimes a legend or a Myth. And if the death of a fact causes distress, you can imagine the effect of an exploding theory or Myth. Scientists have gone to their deaths refusing to swallow the new myth being peddled by that German fella, and the believers have gone to their eternal rest secure in their rock-solid conviction that the Bible was the Word of God, no matter what that damnable Darwin or Huxley argued.

The Word of God: another name for the Bible, it seems. But how many people actually ask what they mean by that phrase? Is it the whole script from Genesis to Malachi (or for Christians, from Genesis to Revelation), meaning God wrote it all? Or do they mean only the Words actually spoken by God's mouth? Don't these deserve some kind of priority? That would cut down the volume a long way; in fact the first chapter of Genesis sets something of a record for direct quotations. Or maybe "the Word of God" is a vague metaphor, meaning all the words that people have written about God and his intentions--at least, all those that have survived several rather fierce editorial meetings. Plenty of scope there for misleading expectations.

What do we find in that first chapter, the one I claim is the first of two different stories?. We find something grand, on a vast scale; in language to match. The process of creation comes in clearly marked stages, over six days, in what seems a logical or reasonable order: for example, "the spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. And God said 'Let there be light,' and there was light." Good stuff; says clearly what he plans, and then does what he said. And at the end of various stages we are told, God saw that it was

Good--not satisfactory, or just as He expected, but Good. Would it be too much of a stretch to describe the account as reasonable, and moral?

From general to particular it moves, with special mention of all forms of life -- fowl, fish, plants, beasts and creeping things, nothing overlooked. (except snakes? or would that be another of our expectations, confusing the issue?). And it is crowned by the prize & climax of creation, the human race, or at least its first team. In God's own words. "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness... and let them have dominion" over the whole earth and all previous species. "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them." How could any reader with half an eye skip over that bit? Not one sex first, then the other, but both at once, and presumably equal--bing bang, yin yang. In the following verses God gives them their marching orders (be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it) and extra advice about diet: every green herb and every fruit is our meat, and every green herb (period) is meat for all the animals. Yes, a non-carnivorous world. Hadn't you noticed? And the first verse of Chap. 2 draws it to a close: "Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them." We never see them again.

Yes, of course we want to know why, who were these people, what happened to them, and what happened to the rest of the story. But before asking, let's be sure where we've been. This is not one of those primitive animal fables, in which life arises as a growth on the back of a giant tortoise, or even worse, as the rotting flesh (forests) and blood (rivers) of a giant beaver who died that we might live. No, this Creation story is pretty sophisticated--but not too clever or elaborate; it does not get lost in a philosophic problem the Romans kept fretting over, namely, you can't create something out of nothing. Instead, it starts with two given things--the heaven, and the earth: but the earth is chaotic and formless, a cosmic mess, needing God's hand to impose order and fertility. And though in many ways this story seems Greek, it isn't troubled by the kind of Greek class system that even shows up in Aristotle--where the Prime Mover is so busy with his sacred job (thinking) that he leaves the rest of us to do the moving, by imitating him; and the actual job of concrete pouring is left (in Plato) to a sort of super-foreman or engineer, called the demiurge.

We may find puzzles along the way. In verse 6 we saw God creating the fixed stars, here called the firmament, and using it to separate two levels of waters, below and above it. This refers to something dreamed up by early astronomers, called the crystalline sphere (I forget why they needed it, and astronomers have forgotten it too). Nor do we need to cause problems by believing (in a literal-minded way) that creation was a 24:6 kind of process. Days as momentous as these might last any number of hours or years; all we need to know is that Time started on the first Day.

We might also incline to question some claims actually made in the story: for instance, God's claim that the human race is the crown of creation, and that our job is to master and subdue the rest of it. I wonder how many of you, after a glance at your face and figure in the glass of a Sunday morning, would seriously stand up before the congregation and declare that This was what God had in mind? I wouldn't; I wouldn't have done it even in

my prime, a month ago, a century ago. A species that has produced Arnold Schwarzenegger (and then elected him to office) had better look out for its image. Maybe our best claim is that we can kill and eat all other species, so we win because we're the only one left. On that basis the virus will deserve the gold medal, if ever he achieves self-consciousness. But I'm thinking of a Bizarro cartoon on Friday last: a pensive scientist in his labcoat, watching a dolphin in the pool and saying, "Your brain is even bigger than ours." To which the dolphin replies, "Perhaps that's why we don't find imprisoning you and forcing you to do tricks 'Entertaining'." But wait a minute: a talking dolphin might surprise us into realizing that we are not reading carefully. The Story never told us what God looks like: it showed us what he is -- reasonable and moral. If we hope to live in his image, wouldn't this be a better way than cosmetics or makeovers?

As for mastering and subduing the earth: we know by now that we've achieved it by burying centuries of our poisonous garbage in the back forty and hoping it will go away. Maybe it will; after the dolphin, and after us. Earth has time to spare; we don't. By the way: there's a special reason to salute the year 2004. It is exactly six thousand years from God's Creation, as calculated by a certain Bishop (Usher). He added up all the begets and the lifetimes of all the big guys, and that was his total. So a happy New Millennium to you, and may God save you from the bishops.

Now if my purpose were merely to astonish or entertain you, I could keep piling up all the questions and spring all my answers on you hey presto, at the end of our road. But I believe that we can make sense of what lies before us, and I think clearing up some darkness is worth more than suspense and magic tricks. So let's tackle the obvious question: why does the first Creation story end here? A Globe & Mail columnist (Russell Smith) might well have asked the same question, when his Jan. 1st story ended with the warning "See Smith on page R4" --but there was no Smith on R4, no trace of Smith anywhere else in the paper. I was not surprised. I know (as Smith knows, and anyone else with a clue in 2004) that a modern newspaper has no editors, only a gang of attention-grabbers and a crew of illiterate print-movers and spell-checkers who squeeze it together. (No modern newspaper ever apologizes for mistakes; it keeps mentioning technical hitches, or "production errors". I figure production doesn't make errors, but producers do.)

Things were different in centuries past. Whether in hand-copied manuscripts or early printed material (and I've brought a facsimile of the 1611 Authorized Version of Creation, just to show you), there were editors, who took their job very seriously. Some were called rabbis, some bishops or whatever; the holy writings were in their care. Now look: when a story has just got going and we're about to meet its chief actors, why would it suddenly break off? Because someone broke it off; an editor, who else. Why should he break it off? Because he was afraid the rest of the story might mislead his readers, and upset their beliefs; or encourage a belief he considered Wrong. Now I am no Bible scholar; but even a humble story-reader can find out what research the scholars have done--and on this one they've been beavering away. I forget whether they still call the male lead Adam (the name seems to mean "red mud", which better fits the poor hero of Creation 2): but I do know their name, the original and forever name, for the female lead,

whom I like to call Adam's first wife. Her name is Lilith; and they have rescued her not just from obscurity but from slander --for the editing rabbis were so set on stamping her out that they turned her into a nasty foreign goddess who crouched like a harpy up in a thorn tree somewhere in Iraq, and (some rabbis claim) kept busy sending rabbis wet dreams.

Why was she dangerous? Because she was Equal; and not just equal, but Independent. Rumour says that she had to teach her consort other roads to bliss than the missionary position. Where would it end? Hebrew males often had trouble with pushy or headstrong females, from Lilith down to Jezebel and beyond; you can check the record. And our own anthropologists are suggesting that the Lilith story recalls the age when the chief gods were the goddesses, the Mothers. The rabbis, guardians of the new male truth, didn't want to go there again. Our own recent history looked as if it might, for a while (Lilith was big news in the late 19th century and again in the late 20th). But then the fashion and gossip chatrooms took over (where would you find a Lilith cover now?), and all thought came to an end. (Fashion doesn't know true from false; fashion knows only What's New.)

So we are left with Creation story No. 2, the source of nearly all our woes. I reckon it begins with the account of the seventh day (Gen. 2:2), because nothing is created on that day but a custom -- first of thousands of social and dietary customs that clog the stories in Leviticus and Numbers. Ask who is it that wants all these rules, and you could make a good guess. But it might be useful to start with the main distinction between the two Creation stories: namely, the Voice that is telling each. This makes a very big difference to any story: consider Gulliver's Travels, which depends on having a narrator who is naïve and Gullible, whose view of the truth is very far from the author's view or intention. (You might likewise fancy a parallel between the God of Story 1, "and he saw that it was good," and Martha Stewart's refrain "and that's a good thing"; but when we compare voices, Martha is hardly in the same league.) Coming to Story 2, we find that its Creator is mostly talked about, and what he is quoted as saying is curiously muffled. His control over creation seems limited too, for he creates herbs & plants but they won't grow until there's a "man to till the ground". Some sign of basic planning here: hired hand needed. Where to find him? Well let's fool around with the mud, recently produced by an uncreated mist that sprang up to water everything in sight. This little mud pie might do the job, if it were automotive (meaning, capable of self-directed action); so let's try breathing into it--that nice old belief that breath and soul are the same thing. Next, a hint that this is still small potatoes: the scene is defined as a small garden planted somewhere "eastward in Eden", amid four mighty rivers watering important territories that have already had geological surveys (2:11-14).

Then something new, a note of concern: "it is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him an help meet for him." But this Creator has to work by trial and error. Instead of producing a fitting assistant, God 2 (he's given a different title, not just God but The Lord God--another clue that this is a different story) -- he creates a whole spectrum of animals and brings them to see what the man will call them (and surely, which of them he prefers). Some rabbis or bishops like to say this gives the wretched hired man a role in creation; but to my mind it has an unmistakable Bill Cosby flavour.

And what you gonna call this one, boy? Well Lawd, I'se gwine call this a Rah Nossruss. Gracious, boy, why a Rah Nossruss? I dunno, Lawd: it jist look more like a Rah Nossruss than any thin you showed me so fah.

So by scientific inquiry it is clear the whole animal kingdom will not supply Adam's need (and don't you forget it, you shepherds watching your flocks by night). Therefore the Lord God has to play surgeon and anesthetist, for the first time ever, and instead of trying another mud doll, to extract a spare rib from Adam and shape it into an inferior being called wo-man (you can just tell, it's not the same product). But Adam seems happy enough, and founds a noble concept of marriage on this piece of surgery. He has no way of seeing that the worst is yet to come. It got sneaked in on the day he was hired: he may eat freely from any tree in his workplace, except one. Note that the Boss gives it a name - -not the tree of knowledge, but the specialized knowledge of good and evil. Eat from that, and it's curtains. Adam doesn't object (it's all so new, and the Boss must have his reasons); and what does "thou shalt surely die" mean, anyway? (he's never heard the word till now.) And it isn't poor dim Adam who blows the game after all--it's the new rib with her down-to-earth curiosity (notice that neither of them gets a real name till the game's over). No, wait, it's the rib, with a vital Assist from the Serpent.

This is revealed in another comic routine. Where art thou? "Here in the bushes, chief: I was afraid, because I was naked." Who told you you were naked? You been eating that fruit I put off limits? "That woman you gave me for company, she made me eat it." The Lord faces the woman: what is this that thou hast done? "The serpent! the serpent beguiled me, and I did eat." --The serpent gets no chance to defend himself (he could have said, who created Me?). Instead, he is cursed at once above all other creatures, and from a king snake reduced to a low-life, crawling on his belly and eating dust: an unfair rap. The humans are banished from Paradise (the lab in Eden) and sentenced to a life at hard labour with no more free meals, followed by death (a return to dust, which is where you came from; oh by the way, it may be cold out there; so here are some fur jackets to help out--but this early start to the fur trade is surely unfair to animals?). And never come back. Remember those cherubim with the fiery swords, barring the way forever to the tree of life (Verse 24)..

You can tell I object to this. Because it's a clumsy job of storytelling? No, in its own way it's quite skilful: a story carefully calculated to put ordinary humans in the worst possible light, to blame them for their fix, and to deny them any clear chance of escape. My complaint is that this myth is nasty, mean-spirited, and dishonest, or at best morally shabby (the game is fixed), and an appalling basis for a religion or a civilization. By sheer position and weight of detail, it disguises the bleeding stump of Creation 1, and may deceive careless readers into thinking it's the original story line. It's time for us to ask again, what Voice is telling this twisted tale, and what the hidden agenda may be. For me the answer has been implied ever since the 7th day, and it leaps into clarity when we read Verse 22 of Chapter 3:

"And the Lord God said, Behold, the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil: and now, lest he put forth his hand and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live

forever..." One of us? To pretend the Lord God (as a character in this story) is saying this, makes no sense at all. The tree of life is a new player, apparently a magic tree which will confer eternal life on any trespasser whether God wills or not (and no warning sign on it). But it makes very good sense as the secret fear of the real speaker--the specialist in God's will, the expert in ethical knowledge, the interpreter (who else is fit?) of God's will to us. In short, the priest (the rabbi, the bishop, whatever hat he wears). It is much in his interest to downplay human ability and promise, to insist that without his special knowledge the rest of us are mere dirt (quite literally). It is your sovereign duty to come to me the priest for advice, not to your wife; and to know that without my expert help you don't stand a chance. --Now let me try a crass translation: "without ignorant clients like you, I'd lose my job."

Think of the endless load of guilt and shame, totally undeserved, on the congregation (on every congregation, Hebrew or Christian) caused by this story. Our ancestors had it all, including eternal life, and they blew it--and blew us too, for we inherit their sins. I think of my mother-in-law, refusing to turn up at Anglican Evensong to confess she was a miserable sinner--when she knew she was not. I think above all of poor John Milton, the sublime poet of the lost Paradise, who was born into this creed and who saw it as his duty, not to clean up the creed, but to explain to the Christian world that even so, God's behaviour was always just and fair. (For example, that the Forbidden Tree was actually a help to our first parents, a standing reminder that they were not lords of the world but owed God gratitude and obedience. Very ingenious; but what a waste...)

And it could have been otherwise, God help us. (We can start the helping for ourselves.) There were options. We could have explored the world with Origen, and learned to see more reasonably. Above all, we could have listened to that excellent British monk Pelagius --who taught that instead of brooding over Original Sin and Predestination, it made far more sense to think of us as poised between good and evil in the real world, with enough sense and willpower to wind our way forward. But whom did the decision makers, the bishops and assembled divines, choose to follow? The worst disaster to befall Christianity: Augustine (I shall give up calling him auGUSTin, because he doesn't deserve a British pronunciation). The tortured convert from Carthage, who confessed his wretched sins and begged God to cure him, but not quite yet. And above all his accursed witch of a mother, who used all her tricks to persuade a decent playboy (with a beloved child and some kind of wife) that he was actually steeped in filth and wickedness.

Show me where I've gone wrong, and I'll be grateful. And let me remind you one more time, that instead of throwing out the Maybe with the Mythwater, as I once put it, we could try a bit harder to see what a Myth truly means.

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