

BRIEF NOTES ON THE GENESIS CREATION AND FALL STORY

Origin stories matter. They tell us who we are, how we got this way, and what our responsibilities are. They shape meaning and help us order life, for good or for ill. Americans origin stories such as Columbus' "discovery" of the "New World" or the landing of the Pilgrims at Plymouth Rock obviously function to legitimate European conquest and settlement of the continent. The modern narrative of evolutionary Progress does the same thing on a broader canvas, asserting that human history since the dawn of Civilization has been a slow but steady climb out of primitive ignorance toward ever-increasing technological, social and economic sophistication. It is a non-negotiable article of faith that our own cosmopolitan complexity is superior to all that has gone before, and that this developmental process was inevitable and is irreversible.

The "primeval history" of Genesis tells a very different origin story, indeed one that contradicts every key aspect of the "salvation story" of Progress. It has for this reason been widely ridiculed in post-Enlightenment modernity as "mythological," "pre-scientific," and frankly silly. But "Ascent of Man" (Bronowski) orthodoxy is showing significant signs of strain under the weight of our deepening environmental crisis, nor does it square with recent research into human origins. The "political" reading of Genesis 1-11 offered in brief outline here has, on the other hand, profound implications for ecological theology and Creation spirituality, not to mention the struggle to save the planet.

The two Genesis accounts of creation, when read as a literary whole, portray "the beginning" as a world that was beneficent and bountiful, in no need of human genius to improve or control it. Human beings were deeply embedded in a living biosphere, with a divine appointment as caretaker, in intimate relationship with the whole of Creation: "Whatever *'adam* called each living being, that was its name" (Gen 2:19f). This same intimacy is signaled (in another Hebrew wordplay) by the creation of "woman" (*ishshah*) from the body of "man" (*ish*)—a relationship of solidarity, not hierarchy (2:22f; see Myers, 2004a).

But this symbiosis is shattered in the tragic tale of Genesis 3. The primal equilibrium of Eden suffers an epochal rupture known in Christian tradition as "the Fall" (see Myers, 2004b). The "human being" (*'adam*) and the "mother of life" (*'ava*, 3:20) conspire to defy the divine taboo against grasping the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil (Gen 3:1-6). This drama has long been read in our churches as a theological morality play (about obedience, freedom, power, and/or sex). But it can also be understood to be a mythological way of explaining the change in consciousness that propelled the rise of civilization. That is, the

“forbidden fruit” symbolizes the primal human conceit that we, by employing our ingenuity, our technology and our social organization, can improve on a Creation that may be “good,” but not good *enough*.

From this view, the Creation and Fall story represents an ancient warning tale. It was produced by Israel's sages, working with and editing older ancient Near Eastern sources, probably during the Exilic period. In the aftermath of the failed Israelite monarchy, they were attempting to understand their historic experiences of royal exploitation, civil war, erosion of the wilderness traditions, and eventual conquest and dispossession. But they were also reflecting upon the *etiology* of human oppression and violence that had brought their people—and all other tribal peoples—to the brink of extinction. The Genesis story identifies the problem not just as moral or political, but *anthropological*: something had gone fundamentally wrong with the human journey, of which Israel's national trauma was but a symptom. Think of Genesis 1-11, then, as a sort of searching post-9/11-type reflection—except that the Hebrew scribes of old had the courage to look at the contradictions of their *own* civilizational experiment, rather than avoiding self-examination by scapegoating their enemies!

It is Genesis' “deep anthropology” that speaks to our current crisis. Indeed, ours is an interesting moment in the protracted culture war between this ancient wisdom tale and our modern messianic fable of Progress—but *not* because of the so-called “Creationist controversy.” For the past four decades post-modern anthropology has been revisiting the question of human origins. On one hand, human lifeways prior to the rise of civilization are being radically revised and revalued; on the other, modern assumptions about the intrinsic nobility (or inevitability) of the turn toward civilization are being questioned.

Human beings lived for hundreds of thousand of years in widely dispersed, clan-based, hunter/gatherer/horticulturalist cultures that were bioregionally situated and organized. These Pleistocene lifeways, according to Paul Shepard (1998), remained unbroken since “the beginning” (regardless of whether we think the story of *homo sapiens* commenced 100,000 or 2.5 million years ago). Thanks to the work of scholars like Marshall Sahlins (1972) and John Gowdy (1998), the anthropological assessment of ancient (and contemporary) hunter-gatherer cultures has shifted almost 180 degrees. “Pre-historic” life (in the still prevalent pejorative parlance) was *not*, as Thomas Hobbes famously and contemptuously put it in *Leviathan*, “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.” In fact, premodern societies have been found to be healthier, more leisurely, freer, more materially satisfied, less anxious and demonstratively more ecologically sustainable than modern industrial ones. The Eden story, then, can be interpreted as a mythic memory of this “deep history,” when humans dwelled symbiotically with the biosphere, relationally with other living creatures, and intimately with the Spirit world.

With the advent of the domestication of plants and animals in the late Neolithic period, around 10,000 BCE, a slow but steady transformation in human habitation patterns commenced. Often referred to as “the agricultural revolution,” it led to increasingly sedentary village lifestyles and growing food

surplus, which in turn led to population increases. Social organization became steadily more complex and violent, as emerging command economies came under management by new military and political elites. The majority of hunter-gatherers did *not* voluntarily embrace these new ways (any more than Native peoples rushed to join European colonizers after contact in the Americas). Rather, through loss of habitat and conquest, they were forced into peasant servitude by agricultural societies voracious in their appetite for land and labor. We know this process happened independently in several parts of the world over several millennia; the earliest archeological evidence for walled cities may be at Catal Huyuk in Turkey (ca 6,000 BCE). But it appears to have first triumphed in Mesopotamia, where delta waterways were harnessed for irrigated farming. Thus the Semitic tribes to the west had front row seats for this unfolding drama, and were among its first victims—which suggests that the old traditions lying behind the Genesis narrative were perhaps the world’s first literature of resistance to civilization.

It is instructive that the main “consequences” of the Fall according to today’s text (Gen 3:14-19) are the woman’s pain in child birth and the man’s condemnation to agricultural toil. Both imply “forced labor” under farming regimes: the woman must bear more children who are physically larger due to higher caloric intake; ‘*adam*’ must now struggle with ‘*adamah*’ that is no longer a gift but a curse. There is both political and historical memory operating here about how the “original abundance” (Sahlins) of free hunter/gatherer/horticulturalists was lost. Societies that domesticate animals and “subdue” land for maximized production ultimately subdue and domesticate people into serfdom. Those who attempted to survive apart were relegated to marginal lands, just as tribal Israel had been driven into the Palestinian highlands and its dry, rocky soil by the Canaanite allies of imperial Egypt who controlled the fertile lowlands.

The Fall story thus preserves the perspective of indigenous people toward the “curse” of aggressive, colonizing civilizations: agriculture portends the end of Eden (3:23f). This is further underlined by the first dramatic scene in Genesis 4: the archetypal story of Cain and Abel. God’s warning to the farmer Cain (whose name means “spear”) is telling: “Sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it” (Gen 4:7). The first use of the word sin in Torah, it implies there is now a power loose in the world that is predatory and addictive, which humans must recognize and resist (see comments below on Romans 5). Abel, on the other hand, may symbolize the remnant of the older, not-yet-fully domesticated life—as a pastoralist (nomadic forager?) he lives with animals outside the village. He seems to enjoy God’s favor.

The first murder takes place in a “field”—the farmer’s domain (4:8). Gen 4:10 articulates further human alienation from the earth: “The blood (*dam*) of your brother cries out from the ground (*adamah*).” As Ellen van Wolde (1996) puts it, the ground is now “seeded” with blood (4:11). For a second time, God pronounces that the natural fertility of the creation has been/will be compromised by the farmer’s presumption over life (4:12). And again the

consequence is exile, now intensified: Cain becomes a “wanderer and fugitive on the earth” (4:14). Wendell Berry (1987) often points out that industrial agriculture, in contrast to local horticulture, has no sense of home, and wanders the world eager to exploit its advantage, displacing and destroying people of place.

Cain’s survival strategy is to build the “first” city (4:17), which as Jacques Ellul pointed out a half century ago, deepens the trajectory of the Fall. Cain names it after his son Enoch, whose name means “re-creation/inauguration” (*chanakh*, 4:17). The vocation of the city indeed seeks a new beginning: to re-engineer all of life according to the dictates of civilization. Within four generations (4:18) the progeny of this project, Lamech vows a “politics of vengeance” (4:23f)—and indeed, we are soon told that the earth is “filled with violence” (6:11). This is, in no small measure, due to the rise of the “Nephilim” (6:4), an untranslatable Hebrew moniker sometimes rendered “giants in the earth,” but clearly identified as “mighty warriors.” (6:4). The strange term appears one other time in scripture, in the report of the Israelite spies dispatched by Moses to do guerilla reconnaissance on the fortified cities of Canaan (Num 13:17-19). The land “devours its inhabitants; and all the people that we saw in it are of great size,” they say. “There we saw the *Nephilim*...and we seemed like grasshoppers to them.” (Num 13:32f; see Josh 14:12; 15:14; Jud 1:10). Thus the *Nephilim*—also called *Anakim* or *Rephaim*—are “larger than life” military opponents in the land of Canaan (see also Dt 1:28; 2:10f; 16-21; 9:1f; 11:21f; 14:12f). Later a heavily-armed Philistine professional warrior (like Goliath, I Sam 14:4-7) is called “one of the descendants of the giants” (2 Sam 21:16).

The Nephilim of Gen 6 seem to symbolize the warrior classes that had come to dominate the Ancient Near East. Paleoanthropologists surmise that these may first have evolved from specialized hunting groups, who were physically stronger and more calculating than the rest of the clan and had become inured to killing. To put it somewhat oversimply: “professional” hunters became strongmen, who over time became chiefs, then kings. This is why cities, in the Genesis narrative, are later identified with kingdoms which are *innately predatory*—in the spirit of “Nimrod the hunter” (10:8-14)! As one scholar concludes: “In a very real sense, ‘true’ warfare may be viewed as one of the more important social consequences of the agricultural revolution” (in Schmookler, 1984:79). So began the longest war in history, in which relentlessly expanding civilizations conquer and exploit the earth and all who live symbiotically with her. It continues to our day.

The account of the Fall concludes with the dawn of empire on the “plain of Shinar” (Gen 10:10; 11:2), symbolizing the Fertile Crescent. Genesis 11 is a thinly-veiled parody of Mesopotamian ziggurats, which claim to reach to heaven, but which God must “come down” to see (11:4-7). Babel is another Hebrew word-play; *balal* means “to confuse,” while in Akkadian *bab-ilu* means “gate of gods,” an allusion to the top of the ziggurat). The Tower symbolizes the fortress architecture of domination and management of imperial conformity (11:1-3); it appears frequently as the target of prophetic denunciations (see e.g. Is 2:16, 33:18; Ez 31:10f; Zeph 1:16; Jud 8:9). Its civilizational heights represent the

nadir of the Fall, the triumph of the wayward human impulse to reengineer the world in order to control and “improve” it (see Eisenberg, 1998).

Throughout this rather depressing narrative of a “descent” the Creator is keenly cognizant of the deteriorating situation. The same divine “council” that created the human being in 1:26 must convene twice again to mitigate the damage, vignettes that neatly bookend the trajectory from Garden to Tower. The council considers the new human determination to re-engineer Creation, and decides upon expulsion from the Eden (3:22f). Then, in the face of Babel’s aspiration to omnipotence (11:6), it recommends “deconstruction” of imperial monoculture in favor of the original vision of a dispersed, tribally diverse humanity (Gen 11:7-9).

God offers other strategic countermeasures to mitigate the curse of civilization in the primeval story. One is the “mark” put on Cain the murderer (4:15). This “tattoo of taboo” could function in two ways. On one hand, it warned people of the land to “watch out” for aggressive farming cultures. On the other, it cautions the reader against thinking that the problem of Cain can be solved by killing Cain. The logic of retributive violence can only beget a spiral of violence, a prospect already embodied by Lamech (4:23f). The land of “Nod, east of Eden” thus becomes the first place of “refuge” for the guilty (see Num 35:13-15, Dt 4:41-43). Analogous practices of sanctuary can be found in many other indigenous cultures, who similarly had to face the conundrum of how to contain the violent pathologies generated by civilization. Another countermeasure is, of course, God’s commission to Noah to preserve life from a Flood that was meant to halt the spiral of violence (Gen 6-9). Though only partially effective, the Ark project results in a renewed Covenant, the heart of which was to re-establish respect for “blood as life” (Gen 9:4-7).

And a third occurs directly on the heels of the Babel story: Abram begins the counter-history of redemption by going “feral” from empire, leaving Mesopotamia for the margins of Palestine. There he encounters afresh the God of Creation as we saw above (Gen 12). Moses repeats this “centrifugal” response to the centripetal forces of empire in the Exodus journey, taking his people from the slave-based economy of Egypt to a wilderness rediscovery of the economy of divine grace (Ex 16; see Myers, 2001:10ff). The Sinai Covenant in turn attempted to teach Israel how to live in resistance to the empires that surrounded her. “Remember the days of old,” exhorts the Song of Moses, “the years long past” (Deut 32:7). And for centuries the prophets, from Elijah to Malachi, relentlessly challenged the people to abandon the idolatry and injustice of civilization and “turn around.” “Stand at the crossroads and look,” wrote Jeremiah, “and ask for the ancient paths, where the good way lies; and walk in it” (Jer 6:16; see Lam 5:21).

It was in *this* tradition that Jesus lived, died and was vindicated. Interestingly, Paul the apostle seemed to understand Christ in terms of this “deep story” of the Fall. In Paul’s Romans manifesto, sin has a history rooted in primal origins; it is a predatory pathology that entered the world with Adam and quickly “spread to all” (Rom 5:12). This rupture with God and the good Creation resulted

in a “reign of death” (the Greek verb is *basileuō*, the vocabulary of empire). But Paul argues archetypally that the lethal rebellion of the First Human can be reversed and healed through the New Human’s restoration of the divine cosmology of grace and gift (5:15-19). We find this same argument—otherwise unparalleled in the N.T.—twice more in I Cor 15. “For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being; for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ” (I Cor 21f). “Thus it is written, ‘The first man, Adam, became a living being’; the last (Gk *eschatos*) Adam became a life-giving spirit” (v. 45).

Modern theology, if it acknowledges Paul’s claim concerning the restorative work of Christ as the “eschatological Human Being” at all, typically folds it into a broader schema of Christological redemption. But it is likely that the “just practice” (Gk *dikaiōmatos*) to which Paul refers in Rom 5:18 was Jesus’ faithful resistance to the project of civilization (which for both the Nazarene and Paul was typified by the violent and oppressive Roman empire) on one hand, and his rehabilitation of the old ways of community, wilderness spirituality and the economics of gift on the other. The life, death and resurrection of the eschatological Adam has, in the juridical metaphor so often employed by Paul, the power to “acquit” all those complicit in the crimes of civilization and restore “life” to all who live under the death shadow of empire (Gk *dikaiōsin zōēs*, 5:18). Christ is thus portrayed by Paul as God’s ultimate counter-measure to the Fall.

The story outlined in such stark, archetypal strokes in Genesis 1-11 names our history, however unsettling that may be. The speed of Progress has been increasing exponentially by the century for ten millennia, as

- the natural world has been increasingly demystified and subjected to ever more intense technological exploitation;
- hierarchical social formations, economic stratification and war have proliferated; and
- human spiritual and ecological competence have atrophied, resulting in growing alienation from both nature and Spirit.

It is impossible to argue, from today’s ecological point of view, that the civilization(s) that have arisen over the last 5,000 (or 500, or even 50) years model lifeways that are as sustainable as those of the previous 500,000 years. Perhaps, then, the old Genesis warning tale isn’t so silly after all.

Children of Progress, we have transformed rivers into electrical power, forests into board-feet for power and profit, and land into real estate. We have re-engineered the atom, the seed and the gene. And as a result, says David Helton:

Life on Earth is actually decreasing... God made all those fowl of the air and fish of the sea and great whales and beasts of the fields and herbs and fruits and creeping things, and by taking His place and manipulating genes we've turned around and subdued every damned one of them... We are the winners. But why aren't we saying, “This is good!”?

In the last two generations—from John Hersey’s *Hiroshima* to Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* to Al Gore’s *An Inconvenient Truth*—it is finally dawning upon us that we now find ourselves in what Derrick Jensen rightly calls an “endgame” (2006). This is why the biblical critique of civilization as Fall, and its counter-story of redemption centered in the wilderness, is a message whose time has come again.

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