

Session 12: The Old Testament Creation Stories

C. Story and Myth

Both creation accounts give us a way of thinking about the world as the good product of a wise God in which human beings have a special role to play. This same theology is expressed in a different way in Psalm 8, a prayer for worship.

Psalm 8

O Lord, our Sovereign,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!
You have set your glory above the heavens.
Out of the mouths of babes and infants
you have founded a bulwark because of your foes,
to silence the enemy and the avenger.
When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars that you have established;
what are human beings that you are mindful of them,
mortals that you care for them?
Yet you have made them a little lower than God,
and crowned them with glory and honour.
You have given them dominion over the works of your hands;
you have put all things under their feet,
all sheep and oxen,
and also the beasts of the field,
the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea,
whatever passes along the paths of the seas.
O Lord, our Sovereign,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!

It is an expression of the Hebrew-Christian creation 'myth', the belief in God as sovereign and all-wise creator. Human beings, insignificant in themselves, are granted a special place in creation by God's decision. They are to have dominion over the world, including the animal kingdom.

The word 'myth' is used here not in the sense of a story that is false, but of a story that expresses a fundamental belief. In this sense, both the creation accounts of Genesis are 'myth'. They give us a picture of men and women in relation to God, creation and each other; they also give hints about the purpose of work and of sex. The continuation of the Genesis story in chapter 3 will similarly suggest a way of understanding toil, suffering, conflict and death.

It is important to realise that the contemporary world also has a creation myth. Most people would be surprised to hear it described this way, for the simple reason that they are used to taking it for granted as the truth. But this is precisely what a myth is: the account we give of fundamental things like God, the world and humanity that provides a framework of meaning for our lives.

According to the creation myth of contemporary Western society everything came about by itself. The world is an expression of the potential of matter and energy. The universe is unimaginably huge and human beings inhabit a middle-sized planet orbiting a middle-sized star towards the outer edge of one of countless galaxies. Life itself and human life in particular is the product of pure chance. We therefore have no special significance. In fact, it is doubtful if the term 'significance' can be given any sort of objective meaning.

It is important to be aware that the 'theory of evolution', which plays an important part in this creation myth, has two entirely different meanings: it is both a scientific and a philosophical theory. As a scientific theory it sets out to explain how a few primitive forms of life gradually developed into the myriad forms we see today. As a philosophical theory, evolution is believed by many to offer an explanation of how life, and human life in particular, could arise without having been planned by God. In fact, it fails to achieve this, but those who believe in evolution this way confidently believe that it has the potential to do so.

This is the myth that gives underlying meaning to much of the arts and academic life in Western society today. In the secular myth, God is an unnecessary hypothesis and to believe in him is an optional extra for those who are religiously inclined. Men and women are no more than highly developed animals. It is a vitally important part of Christian witness to be able to offer people an alternative 'story' by which to live their lives: one with God at its heart. This does not require disbelief in the theory of evolution, but it does mean placing the theory in a different context: the purposes of God for the world he created, and for human beings in particular.

Genesis 2 is only the first part of the Paradise story and some of its details contrast deliberately with what is to come later. The nakedness and lack of shame of the first human couple are to be contrasted with the shame that requires clothing later in the story. Their unity contrasts with the disruption of the relationship in chapter 3. The garden in which the man is allowed to eat anything he likes except the one forbidden tree contrasts with the need to gain his bread 'by the sweat of his brow' and the portrayal of people as 'living souls' with their debarring from the tree of life and return to dust at their death.

Both stories express a belief in a good creation which has been spoiled. In Genesis 1 this point is made with the words, 'God saw that it was good,' and at the end of the chapter, after the creation of human beings, that it is 'very good', or 'as good as it could possibly be'. Both are saying that the world as God made it is not the world we experience now. Something has entered from outside and taken root that spoils it. What that something is and how it is explained will be the subject of the next session.