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E. L. Ham

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THE WORLD OF GOD'S MAKING

(Genesis 1—3)

We begin, as the Old Testament begins, with two stories of creation, each quite different from the other, possibly centuries apart in their initial composition, but put together by the compiler or author of Genesis to strike sparks from one another.

Each is more than a story of creation. Each is concerned as much with the End as with the Beginning. Each gives a vision not of the world as it is, though, thank God, many of the details are still recognizable and familiar to us, but of the world of God's making, the world that he intends, the world that belongs to his Ending. These creation stories are usually read as stories of the remote past. They are really stories of the present, helping us to put our world into perspective, and they are stories of the future, for when God's purposes are fulfilled, the world *will* be of God's making, not ours.

The good order of Genesis 1

To begin to read Genesis 1 in the original Hebrew is to become aware at once of the beauty, the solemnity of the language, and its poetic quality. It hovers on the border between prose and poetry. That border is never very sharply defined in biblical Hebrew, but at times we can say that the text of this chapter slips over into poetry. It is sonorous speech, hiding its profundity in great simplicity, as all the greatest writing does. Above all it is orderly speech, expressing in its rhythms and repetitions the orderliness of the creation it describes.

God begins here not with nothing, but with fearful and awesome chaos. The earth is there, but it is empty, an utterly lifeless waste, a

place where no life can possibly exist unless God transforms it into something quite different. The beginning of verse 2 makes us think of a desert, but the picture immediately shifts to that of a vast mass of water swaying in the pitch blackness. Over this the Spirit of God hovers like a bird, waiting to strike and take chaos for its prey. That is one way of interpreting the Hebrew. Another is to see the mass of water shaken by the wind of God. The Hebrew is ambiguous and we should respect its elusiveness. When dealing with poetic prose such as this, it is not necessary or even proper to choose one possible interpretation and reject another. The text will carry both, and will allow both pictures to enter our imagination.

The first act of God is to speak. 'Let there be light!' He does not address the chaos. Such chaos as this cannot be addressed. The word can only be spoken into the dark. But it is not an empty cry in the wasteland. It is a word charged with the power to create, to transform, to order. The darkness is not banished altogether. It is put in its place. It is put beside God's new creature, light, and given the name 'Night'. God did not create the darkness. It is outside his making. Left to itself it is sinister, and when God looks at the light he has made and declares it fine and beautiful (for that is what the Hebrew word for 'good' means), he does not include the darkness in his delight. Here is the merest hint in the text that this darkness retains the power to become sinister again, to return to being the black dark of the wasteland. Certainly the waters of chaos, divided between those beneath and those above God's new firmament, will take up their old powers of destruction in the story of the Flood. But the talk is not yet of destruction. Nor is it of struggle. This God is not battling with the forces of chaos, winning a victory that is not wholly won. There is none of that at all. Instead the darkness, at the breathing of God's word, ceases to be sinister, and the waters cease to be chaos. They are part now of God's new, emerging order, assigned their places and their functions. Darkness becomes night, and the waters become either the great reservoir above the roof of the sky (so the ancient Israelites envisaged it) which will provide the rain, or else the seas of the earth. God sees what he has done, and it is beautiful. He does not clap his hands in delight. The writer of Genesis 1 is too restrained to picture God doing such a thing, but if our minds do that for us, we will not be far astray.

With the waters in their places the dry land appears and receives its name, 'Earth', its God-given identity. At once, with another word of God spoken, this earth becomes alive with plants and vegetation,

each plant carrying within it its own powers of increase and renewal. The deadness of the chaos with which God began is now gone, and God delights again in what he sees.

Day and Night are already in existence. Only now, on the fourth day of creation, are the sun, the moon and the stars created. This seems strange to us, knowing as we do where our light comes from. But the writer of Genesis 1 means to put the heavenly bodies in their place in more senses than one. Almost certainly the passage was first written in Babylonia, during the sixth-century period of exile. The Ancient Near East, like all other parts of the world, was full of creation stories. It was full too of worship of the sun, the moon and the stars. These were thought of as gods, controlling the lives and destinies of creatures on earth. The most famous of the Babylonian creation stories to have survived, *Enuma Elish*, has no description of the creation of the sun and stars. They already exist in that account, and the god Marduk can only assign them to their stations and give them freedom to move across the sky.

Genesis 1 by contrast leaves us in no doubt that all the heavenly bodies are creatures of the one God's creating. Light itself was there mysteriously before them. They did not create light. God did that, and they are there to do his bidding and to administer the giving of light over the earth according to his already well-established pattern. Thus, in the space of five verses, the writer of Genesis 1 takes the rug from under the feet of the ancient so-called science of astrology, and gives calm reassurance to those whose hopes and fears are bound up, even in our own sophisticated world, with the movements of planets and stars. No wonder God sees what he has done and claps his hands again in delight!

More words are then spoken by the creator, charged now with power to fill the waters upon the earth with fish and crocodiles, and the skies with a multitude of species of birds. New words, not heard before, are needed here. The plants had the power of renewal within their seed. The fish and the birds, however, must be given their powers of reproduction in a second act of their creation. So for the first time God addresses creatures of his directly, and he does so with words of blessing: 'God blessed them, saying, "Be fruitful and multiply . . ."' The first words creatures of God hear are words not of demand, not of judgement, but of blessing. The writer of Genesis 1 understands the grace of God and its priority. Things are not created out of nothing here. They are created out of grace.

Creatures from the heart of God's deliberating

With the next, the sixth day of God's creating, we reach the initial climax of this account. First, as God's word again escapes his lips, the land animals are brought forth from mother Earth (there is a faint echo of the old mythology here), both wild and domestic, and those reptiles that creep upon the ground. The snake in Genesis 3, in the sequel to the second creation story, is condemned to a life of sliding on its belly. For the writer of Genesis 1 there is nothing wrong with creeping. That is what the reptiles were made to do, and God declares them beautiful with the rest.

He does not bless them, however. At least, no words of blessing are expressed at this point. Here is a case where we must be careful not to argue too much from the writer's silence. There are three acts of blessing in this first account of creation, in 1.22, in 1.28, and in 2.3. In the first two cases the blessing confers powers of reproduction and increase. Clearly the writer would not have us believe that those powers were denied to the land animals. Either the blessing is to be taken for granted, or else we must understand the first words of blessing addressed to human beings as covering the animals also.

Whichever option we choose, we see the writer hurrying on to the creation of man and woman. Once there he slows the pace of his account right down, and clothes his language in the most solemn attire he can find. 'Let us make man,' says God, not because suddenly he is plural or conceived as a Trinity, but because the writer uses what the Hebrew grammarians call 'a plural of deliberation'. 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness,' says God, and upon these words whole books have been built from the early days of Christian doctrine onwards.

Often the books have taken the words out of their context, and have been preoccupied with discovering the whereabouts of this 'image and likeness of God' within human nature, or with wondering where it has got to. We need not be surprised by that. The words of verse 27 in particular, where talk of human beings created in the image of God is repeated, have the same quality of simplicity as 'To be, or not to be: that is the question', and like Hamlet's line, are rather wont to rattle round our minds, feeding our imaginations. Unlike Shakespeare's words, however, they are mysterious. We know what Hamlet means. The meaning of these words of Genesis is elusive. That is part of their power and why so much has been written about them. For centuries theologians have been trying to

pin them down, or else have used them to support their own prior understanding of human nature.

Put back in their context they are saying something not about human nature but about God's creating. The light, the firmament and the waters above it, the seas, the dry land, the plants, the heavenly bodies, the fish, the crocodiles, the birds and all the land animals have all come into being as a result of God's speaking, God's making, God's dividing. But nothing has been said of where God got the ideas from. In the case of the human beings the act of creation is different. The idea for this creation comes from God himself. He himself is the pattern after which men and women are made. They come from the heart of his deliberating: the Hebrew plural of deliberation makes that clear also.

It is difficult to say more than that without going beyond the hints the text gives us. But the results of God's creating are clear enough: a creature made not to be a slave and skivvy to the gods as in the Babylonian stories, but to rule the earth as God rules creation. Dominion belongs to these human beings, not as of right, not as of their own taking or making, but as a gift from God. Their ruling the earth thus demonstrates God's generosity. God has put the creation in good order. Now human beings must see that that order is kept. The kangaroos, to lapse into a flippancy that is markedly absent from Genesis 1, must not be allowed to get out of hand! The words of Genesis are dangerous ones to hear in a world where human arrogance stands so tall and where technology enables man (usually it is *man*, not woman) to do such harm to the environment. But there is no hint of tyranny in the sovereignty of God pictured in Genesis 1, and there can be nothing tyrannical about the dominion granted to the creature made in his image.

Curiously enough this is substantiated by God's talk about food. He gives the human beings and the animals and birds plants and fruit to eat, but nothing else. There is no mention of meat anywhere. Here is a vision of a world where no creature's survival depends on the killing of another. There are no predators. None are prey. All live on that which contains within itself its own powers of regeneration. This world God sees, and declares very beautiful.

A world familiar yet strange

The work of creation is done, but the account is not finished. It is still to reach its second and final climax. It does not end until 2.4a

and by then it has spoken of God's rest, and of his third act of blessing. Other creation stories spoke of God resting at the end. The Babylonian myths did, but with them the rest was very different: it was the leisure of gods who took no further part in things, who created the world and then withdrew. Among all creation stories only Genesis speaks of a day of rest, and a day made blessed and holy. This is not withdrawal, but the setting of rest and holy time within the rhythm of the world's passing. The word 'sabbath' does not occur in the text, but in the Hebrew the words for 'seventh' and 'rested' sound very like it, and are from the same root. There is a play on words here, impossible to reproduce in translation, which would make anyone hearing or reading it immediately think of the sabbath. Thus each sabbath, each seventh day, is declared blessed time, holy time, time set apart for the purposes of God (for that is what holy means in the Old Testament). To step inside its boundaries is to find oneself in God's time, enjoying God's rest. That is the vision here. To observe it is to keep to the rhythms of creation. It is as natural as can be, and far away from the pinched, burdensome thing that Christians have sometimes made it. In my experience Jews understand it better and find it easier to observe in the proper spirit.

The words about the seventh day link the world of Genesis 1 with our own. But the words just before them, about a vegetarian diet for humanity and all the animals, divorce us from the vision. However many people are vegetarian, they will not persuade the thrush to stop bashing snails to bits on the garden path, or get the lion to eat grass. There lies the tension in Genesis 1, and it is part of its great profundity. It presents a vision of a world familiar yet strange to us. We know the astonishing beauty which God so much applauds, yet not all is beautiful. We cannot look at *everything* and declare it 'very good'. Out of chaos God in Genesis 1 puts everything into good order. We have a clearer understanding than the writer of the intricacies and remarkable orderliness of the universe and of what we call the natural world. Yet we see so much disorder too.

The undisturbed beauty and orderliness of the world of Genesis 1 puts into sharper focus the beauty and the ugliness, the order and disorder of the world we know. The world of Genesis 1 is of God's making. The world we know, the world of this planet at least, is also of our making. There is the difference. That is why Genesis 1 speaks most powerfully not of the past but of God's future when

the wolf shall dwell with the lamb,
and the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
and the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
and a little child shall lead them . . .
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.

(Isa. 11.6,7)

On any reckoning Genesis 1 is a most remarkable story of creation, and one of its most extraordinary features is not in its text at all, but lies with the time it was written. It belongs, as we have said already, to the period of the exile in Babylonia. That means it belongs to the time when the Israelites had suffered the greatest catastrophe of their history, a catastrophe which it would have been quite natural to interpret in terms of the defeat of their God at the hands of the gods of the Babylonians. Jerusalem had been devastated, God's temple destroyed. All had collapsed into disorder; national life was in chaos. The contrast between the world in which the writer lived and the world of his great vision could hardly be greater. His words represent an astonishing declaration of faith, as good as any creed, if not better. They declare that the past, and more importantly the present and the future, belong to God. They are meant in their calm, solemn way to raise hopes as high as heaven. When we move through much darker places in the Old Testament we must bear in our minds how it all began, in this beginning when God created the heavens and the earth. We must not let the vision fade.

Genesis 2 – 3: Exposing the foundations

The second creation story follows hard on the heels of the first. Its focus is much narrower. Creation stories are universal, belonging to all cultures and every part of the world. They fall into two basic categories, those concerned with the creation of the whole world, and those confining themselves to the creation of a particular species. Genesis 1 belongs to the first category, Genesis 2 to the second. Genesis 1 would be impossible to put on stage. Genesis 2 would be perfectly feasible. Its scenes are small and intimate. For the most part only two or three characters are on stage at any one time.

To step out of Genesis 1 into the creation story of Genesis 2 is like coming out of a grand ornate church, filled with incense and the

sound of a great organ playing a Bach fugue, into a spring meadow on a fresh, bright sunny morning. This is storytelling. Genesis 1, strictly speaking, was not. That moved to two climaxes, but it cannot be said that it had a plot or drama to it. It was a solemn declaration of faith. Now we find drama in plenty, movement, development, suspense, tension, problems awaiting resolution. It is a brilliant piece of writing, and it is no wonder that it has caught and held the imaginations of so many over the centuries.

Everyone knows the story. Or they think they do. It is at once the best known and the worst known of all the stories in the Old Testament. What most people know is not the text, but the vast structure of doctrine which past theologians have built upon it. The story lies hidden in the foundations and all we see is the building above it. In order to reach this story again, in to enable it to become for us a platform for the *fresh*-spoken word of God, we must first demolish the building, or, at least, move it to another site.

The story is not about Satan or the origin of evil. It is not about the Fall. It is not about original sin. It is not about the root of human wickedness. It does not attempt to take us to the heart of humanity's rotten core. It does not describe how death came into the world. It does not present the female of the species as a wicked temptress. It does not suggest there is something basically wrong with sexual desire. Whatever the merits of the doctrines built upon the story, and most of them are not a patch on the story itself, they do not arise naturally from the text. Their true origins lie elsewhere, often in philosophies which, for all the truth that may lie within them, have little to do with anything in the Bible.

A divine kiss of life, and loneliness answered

Though we have referred to Genesis 2 (by which we mean 2.4b-25) as a creation story, it is clearly much more than that. Only verses 4b-7, 19, and 21-2 are concerned with acts of creation, and the narrative as a whole is linked so intimately with another in 3.1-24 that the two are now a unity. One recent American commentator, Phyllis Trible, has called Genesis 2-3 a love story – 'a love story gone awry' – and that is perhaps a more accurate designation.

It starts with creation well enough, the making of a man. Genesis 1.26-7 described the creation of humankind. As Gregory of Nyssa realized long ago (he was a bishop and theologian of the fourth century CE) all humanity is caught up in that act of creation. Genesis

2.7 speaks of a single individual. This man belongs to the past and to the present and future. He belongs to the past, for the succeeding chapters of Genesis will trace the descent of all human beings back to him. He belongs to the present because his name is simply 'Man'. The word '*adam*' in Hebrew means 'man', and indeed it should be translated 'man' throughout Genesis 2 and 3. Nowhere, if we follow the best textual critics, does it appear as the proper name Adam, and many of our versions have to be ignored on the point. The woman also, created later from his rib, is simply 'Woman'. She is not Eve until she is so named by the man at the end. So this story is not just about a couple in the remote past. It is about Man and Woman. It is about us. And this Man and Woman belong to the future also, not because we are given a picture of humanity in all the perfection to which we are called, but because the story shows us how life with God might be lived, and will be when once again the world becomes his Garden.

The acts of creation described in 2.7 and 21-22 are very intimate ones. In the man's case God takes dust from the ground (or from the '*adamah*' in Hebrew: another play on words we cannot reproduce), mixes it with water perhaps (if that is why the stream of water is mentioned in verse 6), and with his own hands moulds his body, then kneels over him to give him a divine kiss of life. In the second act God becomes the surgeon, taking a rib from the unconscious man, and then, as only the divine craftsman can, he makes that into a woman. This is the intimacy with God by which and for which human beings are made!

After creating the man God turns to gardening or horticulture and plants a garden for him. Here he has all the food he needs. As in Genesis 1 there is no mention of meat or hunting or killing. The man need only reach up and pick what he requires. It is all too easy, as we will see again when the serpent comes on the scene.

The garden has an ample water supply also. The ancient Israelites lived in a land and at a time when supplies of fresh water could not be taken for granted. In Eden the supply is enough to water the whole earth.

At this point the writer steps aside from his story to give us a short geography lesson. Here is something strange. Eden is a timeless place, a placeless place, somewhere that cannot be pinned down. It belongs somewhere in the east, that is all we are told. It is of God's planting, and it is, as we shall discover, the place where he can be found walking in the cool of the day. It contains two mysterious trees

which clearly do not belong to our world but to God's. By the end of Genesis 3 it has passed beyond the sphere of human knowledge for ever. It is not surprising, therefore, to learn that two of the four rivers that flow from it, the Pishon and the Gihon, are not heard of anywhere else. They are shrouded aptly enough in Eden's mystery. But the other two rivers are the Tigris and the Euphrates, the two great rivers of Mesopotamia, which rise in Turkey and flow through Iraq into the Persian Gulf. Suddenly, strangely, we are in the world we know. It is another reminder that this story concerns ourselves. It is about us, and we will find plenty more in it that is familiar.

The Garden of Eden is often pictured as a place of blissful ease, where all manner of things once were well. That also is something we must clear out of the way in order to reach the story.

The newly created man has a place where he belongs, right enough, and all the food and water he needs. Nothing has yet spoiled the naturalness and intimacy of his relations with God. He has the freedom of the place and only one thing is prohibited, the eating of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Admittedly the prohibition comes with a dire warning: 'in the day that you eat of it you shall die.' But the warning is not a threat. It is designed to protect his life, and moreover it gives him moral responsibility and the beginnings of a more mature relationship with his Creator. Now he has the freedom to obey or disobey. Before the prohibition obedience had no meaning. Now it has, and the man can choose life or death. He is not his Maker's puppet.

However, he enjoys no 'blissful ease', for he has a job to do: he must till the garden and watch over it. Later in the story man's work will become drudgery. It is not that yet. Here it is designed to give him a sense of responsibility and of purpose and fulfilment. Through his work the Garden can become his garden also. This story places a high value on work, as some of our other notions of paradise do not.

Secondly, it cannot be said that all manner of things are well. The man is lonely. He does not express his loneliness, but God recognizes it, and means to banish it. So the animals and birds are created! This is still a story concerned with human beings, not with the created order as a whole. The animals and birds appear on the scene because of the demands of the plot. The storyteller is not interested in them for their own sake, but as creatures which might possibly cure the man's loneliness. God brings them to the man, species by species, for him to identify and give them their names. At once we see what a measure of responsibility and freedom God has given the man. In

Genesis 1 God did all the naming. Here the man is doing God's work, and he is the one who will decide which animal or bird is a suitable companion and partner. The way God is described in the story is unusually bold, and here it is at its boldest. We are given the sense that God is experimenting, that he genuinely does not know what will suit the man. The man will choose, and he, God, does not know what his choice will be. Such theology might seem naïve. In truth we are not used to such audacity, and can easily miss its profundity. The freedom of the man pictured here is genuine and complete. His choices will make a difference, they will change things. He does not deal with a God who clings on to control of events, for whom everything is already mapped out, but with a God who, as in Genesis 1, shares power with him. He is called into mutual relationship with this God, and such relationship involves uncertainty and vulnerability *on both sides*. It is daring talk . . . and it will end in Calvary.

We have not come to the end of the writer's audacity. He represents God's experiment as failing! He brings to the man a vast and brilliantly varied procession of creatures, yet none of them suits. The goats and the camels and the lizards simply will not do, nor will the eagles or the red-rumped swallows. God, however, is not at a loss. In Genesis 1 creation was not complete until a creature was made in God's image. Here in Genesis 2 the Garden will not be complete, nor will the man, until a new creature is made in man's image. So woman is made, and the man greets her with a cry of joyful surprise. With her wonderful appearing this story of creation reaches its climax. There is companionship and partnership in the Garden now. The man and the woman are head over heels in love with one another (only if we suppose that does verse 24 make sense), they are husband and wife, and with their love and commitment to one another all manner of things are at last well.

Thoughtless disobedience and its consequences

They are not well for long. The writer leaves us no time to dwell on the couple's happiness. He hints at it further by telling us of their lack of shame, but that leads him straight into a play on words which has dark forebodings. The man and woman are 'naked', '*arummim*' in the Hebrew. The serpent is '*arum*', 'clever', 'cunning'. In Genesis 1 human beings were given dominion over the animals. Here they are exposed to an animal's cunning, and are about to fall victim to it.

The serpent is not the Devil. It is not the embodiment of evil. It is

simply the most cunning of the creatures God has made. That is all. We must be careful to respect the terms of the story. Jesus told his followers to be 'wise as serpents': the cunning of the serpent was and still is proverbial.

The serpent slips on to the stage of the story without our noticing, and at once we find it in a dialogue with the woman. The serpent talks, not because it is not really a serpent at all but something much more sinister, but simply because the storyteller has turned to fable. In fables, as we know from Aesop, animals are given to talking.

The creature's question seems innocent enough. Certainly the woman catches nothing untoward in it. To her the words 'Did God say, "You shall not eat of any tree of the garden"?' seem like passing the time of the day, and to an apparently straight question she gives a straight answer. 'We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden; but God said, "You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die."' She quotes the prohibition delivered to her husband, and she gets it exactly right, while adding the words, 'neither shall you touch it'. A lot has been written about her addition by those who would make her the villain of the piece and thus blame it all on the weaker (notice that!) sex. 'See how she presumes to add to the divine command!' they say. 'Not content with the words of God, she has to improve on them! What arrogance!' To which we can reply, 'What nonsense!' The story has given us no cause to read that into the woman's words. All we know about her is that she is all that the man desires, that they are in love with one another in complete self-giving, and that she is wide open to the serpent's cunning. Her words do not represent an attempt to improve on God's. Quite the reverse, they reveal that she understands the prohibition.

To the Israelites the holy was dangerous. It was hedged about with rules and regulations designed to protect the unwary. Sinai, when God appears on it in Exodus, is so holy that barriers have to be put around its base to protect the people. God, we are told, instructs Moses what to say to them: 'Take care not to go up the mountain, or even to touch the edge of it. Anyone who touches the mountain shall be put to death' (Exod. 19.12). In the narrative of 2 Samuel, when David is bringing the ark, the most holy object the Israelites knew, into Jerusalem, a man called Uzzah puts out his hand to stop it slipping off the ox-cart. He touches the ark and is killed on the spot (2 Sam. 6.6-7). We may think these passages tell us more about the ancient Israelites' notions of the holy than about God, but they are

crucial for our interpretation of the woman's reply. The words she inserts reveal she has grasped that the tree is holy, set apart in the Garden for God's purposes, and is not there for her purposes or her husband's. God has surrounded it with prohibition for their own protection.

The serpent, however, thinks otherwise. Its initial question was not as innocent as it seemed. Though the woman did not catch its sinister undertones, not, at least in her conscious mind, it introduced the idea of a God who might prohibit the couple from eating *any* of the fruit in the Garden, and might thus rob them of their ready supply of food. It suggested a God who might cruelly and indeed dangerously tantalize. Now the serpent's response to the woman's reply speaks more openly of a God who tell lies and is intent on looking after his own narrow interests. 'Of course you will not die!' it tells the woman. 'For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.' The prohibition set round the tree is not meant to protect the life of the man and the woman, according to this serpent, but to guard God's monopoly of power. When God told them they would die if they ate the fruit, he was lying. That is the argument, and it is sufficient. The woman takes the forbidden fruit and eats, and gives some to her husband, and he eats also.

But it is not quite as simple as that. The story does not say that the woman agrees with all the serpent has said. She takes the fruit only because she sees that the tree is 'good for food . . . a delight to the eyes and . . . to be desired to make one wise'. What the serpent has done is to rob the tree of its holiness for her. She sees it no longer as something set aside for God's purposes, but as something to serve her own interests. Those interests are modest enough. She wants a little food, a little aesthetic pleasure, a little cleverness and prudence. She does not pick up the words of the serpent about becoming like God. Her ambitions do not rise nearly that far. She grabs for the fruit before she really hears what the snake is saying. She does not stop to think. There is no towering hubris here, no attempt to storm heaven and seize God's place, no attempt to step beyond the limits of the human condition. Like the men who hammer home the nails on Calvary, she does not know what she is doing, and she does not think enough of the consequences. God gave no reason for the prohibition round the tree. The woman in fact worked it out for herself, but now she prefers not to trust her own judgement, but instead that of a serpent she does not wait to

understand. Her action is, as others have seen, 'completely natural', 'perfectly human'. That is what is so disarming about it. If the woman were a monster, we could comfort ourselves by saying that we would not have done as she did. The truth of the matter is that even when we are very far from our worst we are uncomfortably like her.

Genesis 1 gave human beings dominion over the animals. Genesis 3 has a woman and a man trapped in the coils of a serpent's cunning. There is a tragic irony to it all. Genesis 1 spoke of human beings made in the image of God. Genesis 3 presents a serpent wooing them with fine words about being 'like God'. After Genesis 1 they are like God already! We see now the sparks these two stories strike off one another.

There is yet more irony in the results of the couple's actions. The serpent promised them that their eyes would be opened, and indeed they are. Yet all they see is their own nakedness! They were naked before, but then it was natural. Now it is something to hide, a sign of their own defencelessness and vulnerability. They were defenceless before, but they did not feel defenceless, for they saw nothing to defend themselves against. Now they feel exposed, because things are not to be trusted any more, and God himself makes them afraid. Their sense of security is gone.

The serpent promised them knowledge which would make them mistress and master of their lives (such mastery is what knowledge of good and evil means). Yet all they can think of doing is to stitch themselves aprons from fig leaves! God will have to clothe them again before they leave Eden. Their pathetic tailoring would be laughable, if only the situation were not so tragic.

All is spoiled. Exposed and bewildered they attempt to hide from God, and then, faced with what they have done, they pass the blame on to another. The man blames the woman, the woman the serpent. The relationship between the man and the woman is spoiled. Joyful surprise and mutual love are replaced by recrimination. The relationship between the couple and the animals, whose harmony Genesis 1 spoke of so clearly, is spoiled also in so far as they and the serpent are at odds with one another.

What God declares in his judgement only confirms what has already taken place, and makes clear its implications. The serpent was once declared 'cunning', *'arum*; now it is 'cursed', *'arur*. There will be lethal enmity between it and human beings. The woman will long for her husband, but where once she was his equal, now she is to be his subordinate. Mutual self-giving is tainted with subjection and

the need to obey. In Genesis 1, in the world of God's making, human beings, both male and female, had dominion over the animals. Now in the garden of the couple's spoiling, it is decreed that man will rule over woman. Nor is that the end of the woman's anguish. Nothing in ancient Israel brought greater honour to a woman than the bearing of children to her husband. This woman will indeed have children, but now in most terrible pain. Her moments of greatest fulfilment and achievement will be clouded with the pain of labour. It will be much the same for the man. He means to find his sense of fulfilment and achievement in his work, but that will now become back-breaking toil. No more the easy harmonious relationship between the fertile world of plants and human beings. No more easy pickings, but instead a constant battle against an unyielding soil until the man's dying day. In Genesis 1 God had only words of blessing for what he had made. Now he lays a curse on the ground and on the serpent too.

The story of Genesis 3 is unutterably sad, and there is sadness yet to come, for the man and woman are driven out from the Garden, and the way back is barred to them. Eden in this story is not the place where God dwells. But it is the place where human beings might bump into him in the cool of the day. Outside Eden meeting God is problematic. Men and women will have to live in hope that God will search them out. No longer is there an inevitability about the encounter.

Many have said that the imposition of death is part of the couple's punishment, but that is not the case. They were not created immortal. That is made quite clear when God denies them access to the tree of life *lest they become* immortal. Certainly death is mentioned in those words 'You are dust and to dust you shall return.' But they do not introduce death as a new phenomenon, only as the end point of the man's life of toil.

There is a bitter irony, even sarcasm in the words of God which introduce his banning the couple from the tree of life and from the Garden. 'Behold,' he says 'the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil . . .' That is precisely what the couple have *not* become. God means the very opposite of what he says. The words bear the full weight of his bitter disappointment and sense of loss. Yet if we recall Genesis 1 and its pronouncement about human beings being made in God's image and likeness, then a further layer of irony is exposed. God's words express at one and the same time what is demonstrably false and what has been true all along. The compiler of Genesis who put the two stories of creation together

greatly heightened the tragedy of the second. His too was work of sheer genius.

It might seem to us that the sentences passed by God in this story are intolerably harsh. Let us remember that things are already spoiled before the sentences are ever pronounced. This is obvious from the first words spoken by the man to God. They are the very first words we have yet heard in these creation stories addressed to God by a human being, and in their great simplicity they encapsulate the tragedy of the human condition: 'I heard the sound of thee in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; and I hid myself.' It is obvious also from God's having to remind the man that he has infringed a divine command: 'Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?' (He will have to remind him again when passing sentence.) It is clearer still from the veiled accusation in the man's reply: 'The woman *whom thou gavest to be with me*, she gave me fruit of the tree and I ate.' It is all God's fault now, it would seem, and this from the man who greeted woman at her making with such joy!

What is unexpected about God's sentences is not their harshness but their leniency. '... in the day that you eat of it you shall die.' Those were the terms of the prohibition. Unlike Uzzah, the man and woman do not die. The holy does not, after all, have its almost magical power to destroy those who touch it. And God's apparent change of mind reveals that indeed the prohibition was meant to protect the man and the woman. Despite its infringement he shields them from the harm of the holy, and protects them also against the rigours of life outside Eden by making them coats of skins. Once beyond Eden the first thing the woman will do is conceive and bear a son 'with the help of the Lord' (4.1). They will not leave God's protection behind in Eden, nor will the words of blessing spoken in Genesis 1 have lost their power. This God will not let the man and the woman go. Other stories in the Old Testament bear even more eloquent witness to his tenacity.

The familiarity of the Garden

Genesis 2-3 is on one level about an individual man and woman. On another it is, as we have said already, about Man and Woman. It is about the human condition, not as it once was, but as it is, and as we long for it to be. It is written as if it was about the remote past, but it is more about the present and the future.

The world of the Garden is familiar enough. The sentences passed by God at the end reflect the world we know (except that we are rather better informed now about what snakes eat!). The joys of childbearing and motherhood are indeed mixed with pain, and work too often is drudgery. The battle simply to survive is for many a fierce one, and life is lived at odds with things. Even the most comfortable have the sense that things are not as they should be. Women have generally still not achieved equality with men, and subservience and the need to obey are still a feature of many marriages. (It is astonishing that a story coming out of such a male-dominated society as ancient Israel should protest that only full equality belongs to the world of God's making.) Furthermore we are familiar with the sense that encounter with God is problematic. It is not only Jews from the holocaust who have had the keen sense of God's absence from the world, and who have caught a glimpse of his retreating back. Rootlessness is a common affliction, or else a sense of not being rooted where we belong, of not yet being at home with God, able to bump into him as he walks in the cool of the day.

Yet still men and women fall head over heels in love with one another. Relationships of remarkable depth and closeness can still be enjoyed between human beings and animals. The fertility of the earth is in many places still remarkable. The sense that beneath it all, all is well, still comes over many people, even in harsh and cruel circumstances. And the intimacy with God so beautifully expressed in the accounts of the making of the man and woman can still at times be enjoyed.

The story might give us the impression that the real world is that of chapter 3 and the Garden of chapter 2 is only a dream. By the grace and mercy of God the experience of very many human beings would suggest that that impression is wrong and that, in fact, despite the story's ending, we still have one foot in Eden. One Day, at God's Ending, we will complete our return, for God himself will take us back there.