

Introduction

The first three chapters of the Book of Genesis, so Bishop Kallistos Ware tells us, were described by St. Gregory of Nyssa as “not so much history as ‘doctrines in the guise of narrative.’” It is not whether the Genesis creation story is literally true which is essential, but what is of absolute importance is the truth which the story tells. We learn from this how the Fathers of the Church looked far beyond any literal reading of the Scripture to seek the fullness of truth that God reveals to humanity. Genesis is important to us not so much for its human history as because it reveals the doctrines of God.

Genesis 1 opens with a bang – not the Big Bang by which astrophysicists claim the universe came into existence, but with a very intense theological revelation. The Book opened with God, the main character of the story (the only character!) creating the center stage upon which He will recite His creative poetry which brings the entire cosmos into existence. In Genesis 1, the Word of God is the actor in the narrative, not the narrator himself. God “clothes” His active love in words which bring the physical universe into existence. God’s words becoming physical reality will culminate in the New Testament when the Word became flesh and God actually enters into history and into the world which He created. The incarnation of the Word changes everything and yet it is only the culminating completion of what God started “in the beginning.”

God originally clothed humans in glory, and at least by the understanding of the early Christian, it is precisely this garment which humanity lost when it sinned against the Lord. Sin led to God exchanging the garment of glory in which He originally clothed the humans for the garments of skin. Such was the Fall of humanity – we lost something vital and beautiful. The world we now live in is not the Garden of Paradise God originally planted for us nor where He intended us to live.

Genesis 4-11 is completely the **postlapsarian** world (terms in **bold print** are defined in the glossary) - a look at humanity immediately after Eve and Adam had committed that original sin against God and were expelled from Paradise. These early chapters of Genesis do place us in the world that we know, but they do not intend to leave us here for they are written with a sense of motion. They are moving us to and through the events which ultimately culminate in Christ coming

into the world. In this sense Genesis 4-11 might be described as the precursor or prequel to the story of the **incarnation** of Christ.

It is only with the incarnation of the Word of God that glory is restored to humanity, something which the Orthodox commemorate at each Saturday evening Vespers with the Prokeimeon, "The Lord is king, he is clothed in majesty." It is a hymn of the incarnation in which the flesh is not glorious but is glorified by the God-man putting it on. It is the Word of God putting on flesh which bestows majesty to that flesh with which He has clothed Himself. Christ is God in the flesh working to undo the effects that ancestral sin has had on all humanity. Each Saturday evening at Vespers we celebrate the fact that God has not left us in the world of Genesis 4-11 but has in fact begun the process of salvation in which His Kingdom breaks into this fallen world giving us hope for the future and a reason to love and obey Him in this world.

However, to understand the salvation given to us in Jesus Christ, we do need to understand the world to which God sent the first humans when He expelled them from Paradise. In Genesis 4-11 the story of creation is going to become decidedly more focused on the humans as God recedes into the background (or into the heavens, if you will). God will play an active role in the story, but in some ways the story is less God's story and more the story of God's creation and of the creation's relationship to its Creator God.

The same narrator who described the creation of the cosmos "in the beginning," continues with his reporting of events. The narrator offers us no editorial comments about what he is describing, very little moralizing. His task is descriptive not prescriptive. It is our task as the readers of or listeners to the Scriptures to understand their meaning which is derived from the big picture – the entirety of Genesis and of the Old and New Testaments. "When you read Holy Scripture, perceive its hidden meanings," as St. Mark the Ascetic (5th Cent) said. "For whatever was written in past times was written for our instruction (Rom 15:4)... Those who do not consider themselves under obligation to perform all Christ's commandments study the law of God in a literal manner, understanding neither what they say nor what they affirm (1Tim 1:7). Therefore they think that they can fulfil it by their own works." St. Mark argues that those who think they can fully understand the scriptures by themselves are relying on their own works for salvation. He argues that the Christian cannot simply read

the scriptures literally, he must be willing to do what Christ has taught, and for St. Mark this will only occur in Christian community where one can see others living according to the commandments and be taught and corrected by them. For Christians the key to understanding Genesis is found in Christ. And the key to opening the full meaning of the text comes with being willing to obey Christ within His chosen community. Genesis is seen by Christians as bearing witness to Christ, and being fulfilled and explicated in and by Jesus Christ. (St. Augustine claimed, “the New Testament lies hidden in the Old, and the Old Testament lies open in the New.”) Thus to read Genesis apart from Christ is to miss its main purpose and meaning. Our main way of reading scripture in Christ is to do it within His Body, the Church. Thus my reflections on Genesis include quotes from the New Testament and from the Patristic writers in which we learn how Christians inspired by God have interpreted the text of Genesis through the centuries. I also have included quotes from our sacramental and liturgical prayers and hymns which are related to the texts we will be studying to show how Genesis 4-11 is used in the worship of the Orthodox Church which shapes much of our understanding of the Bible.

Fr. John Behr (TMOC) points out that in Acts 8 when the Ethiopian eunuch ask the Apostle Philip about the scriptures he was reading (which would have been the Old Testament), he does not ask “what is the meaning of the passage?” but rather he asks Philip “of whom does the prophet speak?” The meaning is not found in the text itself (as modern readers would assume) but rather meaning is in the person of whom the text speaks – Jesus Christ. Christ is the key who gives meaning to the scriptures, even to the Old Testament texts. For early Christians the Word of God was Jesus Christ, not a book. The only book of scriptures the authors of the New Testament knew was our Old Testament, and they believed this bore witness to Christ, not just to past history. They weren’t as worried about whether the Old Testament was literally true as they were interested in knowing how the Scriptures reveal Christ to us and of what precisely that revelation consists. The modern obsession with whether or not Scripture is literally true is a very narrow perspective and causes us to lose sight of the depth and riches of the Scriptures.

As in my first book, *QUESTIONING GOD: A LOOK AT GENESIS 1-3*, so too in this series of reflections I caution against making a literal reading of the text as the test for whether someone believes in God. Not because the narrative is not

“true” but because limiting the text to a literal reading is to limit the revelation of God. God is not restricted by our literary efforts nor by our need for literalism. God is the poet par excellence. He also is the master story teller and giver of parables. God’s Word is living, active and sharp, not flat and one dimensional. It is a deep well of spring water which gushes forth with new and life giving meaning. Just for the sake of example, Genesis 2:24 says that a man leaves his parents and is joined to his wife as one flesh - perfectly understandable in its literal form. St. Paul however makes very specific use of this text. After quoting Genesis 2:24, he wrote, “This is a great mystery, and I take it to mean Christ and the church...” (Ephesians 5:32). St. Paul takes the text of Genesis and says its real meaning is figurative not literal. God’s revelation recorded in Genesis finds its fulfillment and meaning in Christ and in the Church. The literal reading of Genesis would never get you to that truth – to the fullness of the text’s meaning - only a **Christocentric** reading can.

Because of the way St. Paul interprets the Old Testament, St. Augustine in his LITERAL COMMENTARY ON GENESIS declared, “No Christian would dare say that the [words of Scripture] are not to be taken figuratively.” He cites in defense of his idea the interpretation of the Old Testament that St. Paul himself uses in 1 Corinthians 10:11 (“Now these things happened to them *as a warning*, but they were written down for our instruction, upon whom the end of the ages has come.” The RSV’s “*as a warning*” is the Greek word “*typikos*” - *a type* or as Augustine’s latin said, “*figuratively*”) and also in Ephesians 5:31-32 (where Paul figuratively interprets Genesis 2:24 - about a man leaving his mother to cling to his wife – to refer to Christ and the Church rather than interpreting it literally). Augustine like most of the Patristic writers assumed scriptures have a meaning which is deeper than any plain reading of the text can reveal. He assumed that scripture has multiple levels of meaning and the believer’s task is to discover those meanings. The Patristic Writers could point to the many texts in the New Testament where the Old Testament is read and interpreted by non-literal methods.

When reading the first book of the Bible, we might also remember the words of St. Augustine who in his own commentary on that book warned against pitting Genesis against science and reason, “In matters that are so obscure and far beyond our vision, we find in Holy Scripture passages which can be interpreted in very different ways without prejudice to the faith we have received. In such

cases, we should not rush in headlong and so firmly take our stand on one side that, if further progress in the search for truth justly undermines that position, we too fall with it." Long before the modern debate between science and religion, Augustine almost presciently can imagine that progress in the human understanding of things might show us truths that contradict a literal reading of scripture. He warns Christians not to rush into that trap and to be cautious when speaking about things (like science) that may through further observation and reason be shown to be true yet are not taught by the Scriptures. Many Christians fail to realize that much of the demand that Scripture must be literally true doesn't come from the Scripture itself, but comes from non-believers who say if the Bible is not science or scientifically true then it is of no value (or is not true). The Bible contains the revelation of God, not the discoveries of science. The Bible never claimed to be a textbook of scientific discoveries. Rather the Bible reveals God to us and reveals what it means to be human. That is what we should be reading the Bible for, and that is why we often must get beyond the literal statements of the Bible to discover the revelation of God which is found, and sometimes hidden, in the written words.

St. Clement of Alexandria (d.211 AD) argued that meaning of scriptures is hidden intentionally so that we are forced to seek out their meaning. He takes what Jesus says about parables in Mark 4:11-13 ("To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables; so that they may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand; lest they should turn again, and be forgiven."), and applies the teaching of Christ to the entirety of the Bible. We either are going to be dull and tired of God's Word, or we are going to work hard to try to understand its meaning even when it is hidden from us. Theodoret of Cyrus, 5th Century bishop, acknowledges there is meaning concealed in the text of the scriptures, but he believes it is God Himself who will reveal the meaning of the text to us:

Previous scholars have promised to resolve apparent problems in holy Scripture by explicating the sense of some, indicating the background of others, and, in a word, clarifying whatever remains unclear to ordinary people. ... trusting not in myself, of course, but in the one who dictated this manner of composition for the Scriptures, as it belongs to him to bring to the fore the meaning concealed in the text. He it was, after all, who in the sacred Gospels presented his teaching in parables and the provided the

interpretation of what had been in riddles. My appeal, therefore, shall be to gain illumination of the mind from him, so I may endeavor to penetrate the innermost sanctuary of the most Holy Spirit.” (TQOTO, pp 3-5)

St. Jerome (d. 420) in his day, praised the widow Marcella for her persistently inquiring mind when it came to the scriptures: “...she never came without asking something about Scripture, nor did she immediately accept my explanation as satisfactory, but she proposed questions from the opposite viewpoint, not for the sake of being contentious, but so that by asking, she might learn solutions for points she perceived could be raised in objection. What virtue I found in her, what cleverness, what holiness...” (quoted in Hall, RSWTCF). To approach the scriptures in order to learn, with an inquisitive mind, with difficult questions was once viewed as virtue by the Christian Church and the right way for believers to approach the Scriptures in order to understand them. To hunger and thirst for a deeper meaning of the scriptures, beyond a superficial or literal reading, was once thought to be normative for Christians and not just the prerogative of the non-believers. Strange that today if someone asks difficult questions about the Bible we assume they are a nonbeliever!

In writing my reflections, I found the first three chapters of Genesis to be a luscious orchard filled with a super abundance of ripe fruit perfect for meditation. Each verse blossomed into many ideas each filled with live-giving wisdom and understanding. Certainly every verse yielded a hundredfold in terms of the number of words in my reflections! I found Genesis 4-11 to be a garden with much more difficult soil to work, and requiring myself as the husbandman to do a lot more work for a lot less yield. This may reflect the fact that the earlier chapters of Genesis take us into the Garden of Paradise where God-given fruit abounded, and all that is left to us is to reach out and partake of the sweet fruit. Genesis 4-11 is life outside of the Garden of Delights. The soil has become cursed and requires us to till to produce any fruit at all. Nevertheless, God commanded us to do just this work and to produce the fruit of the ground with thanksgiving and to His glory. These reflections are the result of those labors – a labor of love. My hope is that it will bear fruit in your life as well – an ever deeper appreciation for the scriptures, and the joy of searching in God’s garden to find the fruit of hidden treasures. Questioning is a very appropriate gardener’s tool when working one’s way through Scriptures, and wondrously enough questions are also and often the fruit of the labor of reading the Bible.

A disclaimer – this is a collection of reflections, it is not a scholarly word study. I do not read Hebrew or Aramaic, so I don't comment on the etymology of each word in the text, though that is a valuable way to study the Scriptures. I do not comment on the meaning of each person's name, although that too can be helpful in understanding the Scriptures. Nor have I done a numerological study, even though certain numbers repeat throughout Genesis and obviously have a symbolic value. Generally such studies can be found in scholarly bible commentaries, dictionaries and encyclopedias (a couple which I have listed in the bibliography). This work is also not meant to be Orthodox dogmatics. These are simply my reflections on the text. I've included concepts found in the text that disturb me or that I cannot readily explain. I believe that in reading God's Word, one way to approach the text is to look for answers. But a different and very insightful way to approach the text is to discover what questions arise from the text? To what mysteries does it open our minds? Since it is a revelation from God, what challenges does it present to our very limited and one-sided human thinking? I embrace St. Basil the Great's notion that a God who is totally comprehensible is no god at all, but nothing more than the projection of the best of human intellect. The God whose ways are not our ways, and whose peace is beyond our understanding, is going to have a logic that we are not always going to comprehend. It is exactly this logic which is at work in the universe and as revealed in the Scriptures – a logic which is beyond our human understanding – which actually led Dostoyevsky to believe a God must exist for how else can we explain the seemingly incomprehensible events of life?

The Lord Jesus said, "As for what was sown on good soil, this is he who hears the word and understands it; he indeed bears fruit, and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty" (Matthew 13:23).