

An After Word

Genesis opens with words of grandeur and mystery: “In the beginning, God...” God creating the heavens and earth is the beginning of space and time which are necessary for our own existence. Genesis does not begin offering insights into this God apart from His creating and His creation; despite God’s revelation of Himself, He remains a mystery to us, with His essence beyond our capability of knowing. (Fifth Century Bishop Theodoret of Cyrus postulates that Genesis does not begin with dogmatics because the ancient Israelites were not yet ready to understand the depths of such revelation and rather needed to learn about the Creator to refute the false worship of creation the Jews were coming to accept at the time of Moses who is credited with writing the story). The story of God for us commences not in eternity but in His self-revelation. When God chose to reveal Himself, He created that which is “not God,” that to which He can reveal Himself. God’s initial action inaugurating creation is to speak His Word, and in doing so light comes into existence. God’s spoken work is all about illumination and revelation, making it possible for those with eyes to see. God brings forth life, which is to say “not God” into being, and also empowers this “not God” with the ability to perpetuate itself through procreation. That which is “not God”, creation, shares in the life of God and the life-givingness of God. We create and procreate because God shared Himself with His creation.

While we logically read the Genesis story as the beginning of our story as human guests on God’s earth starting with verse 1:1, experientially the story of Genesis begins for us in its last line: “So Joseph died, being a hundred and ten years old; and they embalmed him, and he was put in a coffin in Egypt” (Genesis 50:26). This last line of Genesis causes us to stop and ask, “How did we humans ever get to this point, lying dead in a coffin in Egypt?” We started with God creating the heavens and the earth. We started with God breathing His breathe into dust and forming a living being. How did humans created in God’s image and likeness, placed in a perfect garden whose landscape architect and maker is of God, created by God to have dominion over the entire world, chosen by God to be His people and doers of His will, ever end up dead in a coffin in the foreign land of Egypt? Why aren’t we living in a perfect world, in which God clearly reigns over all, and in which humans are clearly regents over every other form of life on earth? Why aren’t we living in paradise or at least the Promised Land? The answer to that question is exactly what the Book of Genesis is about. Genesis is our spiritual sojourn back in time to discover how we became the beings we humans are. More than a historical accounting, Genesis is a spiritual sojourn – the unfolding of human interaction with God and with creation. Archbishop Lazar Puhalo, sums it up this way: “The book (Genesis) commences with, ‘In the beginning God created...’ and ends with the words, ‘...in a coffin in Egypt.’ These first and last words of the First Book of Moses, Genesis, are in themselves a summary of man’s spiritual history, for God is ever saving and man is ever falling; God is ever delivering and man is ever becoming enslaved; God is ever giving life and man is ever choosing death.” (TCAF, p. 3).

We read Genesis to understand our human condition, our human nature, our human plight, and our common human experience. We read Genesis to experience God’s role in the world in order for this to be the foundation for our faith in God and our hope in the future. We read Genesis to understand Jesus Christ. We read the first book of the Bible to learn how to live in this world with faith and hope, and to prepare ourselves for life in the world to come. Genesis is thus much more about our present and our hoped for future than it is about the past. “For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope” (Romans 15:4).

I conclude with the same words with which I ended QUESTIONING GOD: “We could say more but could never say enough; let the final word be: ‘He is the all.’” (Sirach 43:27, NAB)