

# The First Sin

## Genesis 3 -11

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### The First Sin (Genesis 3-11)

The first two chapters of Genesis tell of the wonder and splendour of God's creation. God saw that all was 'very good'. Chapters 3-11 present us with a very different situation: age-old traditions as before, but this time telling of a fall, of an expulsion from paradise, of mounting sin and evil, so that God 'repents' and wants to 'rub out' his handiwork by a great flood. Still the mercy of God shines through, and a fresh start, a sort of renewal of primitive times, is depicted. But once again sin prevails, and corruption, and this part of Genesis then ends with the curse of the tower of Babel. The primeval history (Gen. 1-11) seemingly ends without hope or promise: but precisely at that point begins the sacred history of Abram and of God's promises (Gen. 12).

Such in outline is the story which is to be examined a little more closely in this pamphlet. Like all Genesis 1-11, this part has its own special literary form. There is nothing like it in the literatures that we know. Very old traditions of the Hebrews - some going back to Moses, some even before - have been gathered together and re-used and re-written, perhaps several times over, but mostly by the author (known to scholars as 'Yahwist') who wrote perhaps between 950-850 B.C. [ See scanner's footnote and appendix.] Whoever he was, he had great literary gifts (thus Genesis 3 is a masterpiece of writing). He profoundly conveys God's message in a narrative which is largely of shame and fear and disorders that flow from sin. And precisely because the author had faith, he could talk so effectively about sin and its spreading, as also of the mercy of God which wonderfully shines through the sad tale of mankind.

[Scanner's footnote: My reading and understanding of the decrees of the Pontifical Biblical Commission would lead me to say that the traditions in Gen. 1-11 all go back to Moses and to traditions already in circulation in Moses' day. The human author of these chapters should be considered to be Moses (circa perhaps 1600 B.C.) I have scanned the relevant decrees in the appendix.]

As in Genesis 1 and 2, this section (3-11) has many ways of talking, figures of speech and anthropomorphisms (= making God talk or act as a human being). But the author of Genesis had as much sense as we have and perhaps a bit more, and he knew perfectly well that snakes don't talk [Scanner's note: 'in normal and natural circumstances'], that God does not 'repent', nor 'smell a sweet savour' when Noah offers sacrifice (Gen. 8:21). The author, however, can tell a good story, and by means of old traditions and figures of speech convey eternal truths about God and about man's falling away from God and about God's mercy. These are the sort of things which really matter, and the sort of truths put across by what is not only word of man but also word of God.

Before going any further, make sure of reading and re-reading chapters 3-11 of Genesis.

### THE STORY OF THE FALL (Gen. 3)

Divide this chapter into four sections: (a) temptation and fall (vv. 1-7); (b) God's enquiry (vv. 8-13); (c) penalties and the first glimmer of hope (vv. 14-19); (d) execution of the sentences (vv. 20-24). There is much artistry in the pattern of these verses: thus, the serpent sins first, then the woman, then man; God's enquiry goes from man to woman and then to the serpent; the order of the curses is, once again, serpent, woman, man.

Now the serpent was more subtle than any other wild creature...(3:1). It is not enough to say that the serpent is an animal. Read vv. 4, 5, 13, 14 to see what the author meant by the serpent, namely the devilish power of temptation and God-contradiction which characterizes the 'serpent' in Scripture (cf. Am 9:3; Is 27:1; Job 26:13). The serpent stands for the devil or power of evil. This is what the author meant to convey under the figure of a devilishly-thinking and talking snake. This is certainly how 'serpent' was taken by all later Hebrew and Christian tradition (cf. Wis. 2:24, 'by the envy of the devil, death came into the world'; cf. Jn 8:44 and Revelation 12:9, 'that ancient serpent who is called the Devil'). This serpent or devil is the chief protagonist of the drama presented to us in chapter 3 of Genesis.

Did God say 'You shall not eat of any tree of the garden'? (3:1), or 'Has God really commanded you...?' The devil exaggerates the terms of God's precept (cf. Gen. 2:16-17), and is crafty in making it seem odious. Eve certainly knew, and understood, God's command (cf. verses 2 and 3).

You will not die (3:4). The serpent or devil now openly contradicts God's word. His malice is most apparent here - even to the point of attributing base motives to God, which is just blasphemy.

When the woman saw that the tree was good for food...(3:6). There is a sort of progression in Eve's sinfulness: (a) thus to talk with the devil at all; (b) lack of self-restraint; (c) no longer wishing to submit herself to God, but instead craving for the mysterious knowledge of good-and-evil (= knowing all) which is God's prerogative.

...she took of its fruit and ate...(3:6). The first sin is reckoned by theologians to be that of disobedience consequent on pride - and Adam collaborates in the evil. (Cf. the reflections of later Jews in Eccles 25:33, 'From the woman came the beginning of sin, and by her we all die', and of the New Testament in 2 Cor 11:3 and 1 Tim 2:14.) St Paul saw our first parents as representatives of the human race and considered their sin thus. Further, he saw in Adam and Jesus Christ the two leaders of mankind. Through Adam sin and death came into the world; through Jesus Christ came salvation (Rom 5:12, 21; cf. 1 Cor 15:21-22).

Then the eyes of both were opened...(3:7). A sense of shame followed upon the Fall. This contrasts forcefully with 2:25, where all is ordered bliss and innocent happiness. We have here the author's simple way of describing a radical change in their situation before God. He had one point to teach - the fall from God's friendship; and he went on to teach it yet more explicitly by the story of God's enquiry in vv. 8-13.

And they heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day (3:8) is a delightful picture of God in the shade of an eastern garden. But the author is no more dupe of the imagery than we should be. This is a typical anthropomorphism or representation of God in very human traits. It has even been suggested that God had a regular time for walking with Adam and Eve, towards evening, when a cool breeze could strike up. But even 'sound' is a figure of speech!

Where are you? (3:9) As if God did not know! There is a suggestion that the presence of the culprits is necessary (they had 'hid themselves from the Lord'). That is how the story is told, yet the author knew all the while, as we do, that God does not need the actual presence of the culprits, nor does he need to look for them. So the story goes on, and story it is with a deep meaning.

Who told you that you were naked? (3:11), that is, how Adam has fallen from a state of total innocence to one of shame. The blame is passed on to Eve (3:12), and then on to the serpent (3:13).

Because you have done this, cursed are you...(3:14). In a picturesque way the evil power is represented as an accursed beast forced to crawl on its belly and eat dust. There were old legends that the serpent did eat dust and dirt, and that it was once upright in its gait. [Scanner's note: Who is to say that this was not so of an actual 'serpent'?] But old legends are left behind. In figured speech it is the devil who is cursed as if a serpent were forced to eat soil, etc. 'Crawling on the breast' and 'eating earth' were expressions signifying loathing and contempt (cf. Mic 7:17: 'They shall lick the dust like serpents, as the creeping things of the earth'). The loathing and contempt are for the devil, who is now confirmed as lawless, against God, and head of all evils. In this text God underlines his true character; and he is prince of this world, cast out at our Lord's passion (cf. Jn 12:31).

I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed: he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel (3:15). This is one of the particularly great verses of our Scriptures, because mysteriously, in a context of cursing and loathing of the devil, comes a suggestion of something quite different, and intended by God. The approach is gradual. First comes a prophecy of lasting 'enmity'. God is made to say 'I will put enmity', i.e., God intervenes of set purpose. [Scanner's note: God is 'made' to say?! Did not God just say...?] There is to be no collusion but hostility between good and evil, between the devil and mankind. The word for hostility ('ebah') is used in Hebrew of hostility between men (Num 34:21-22), between peoples (Ezech 25:15; 35:5), and notably here between the serpent and the woman (Gen. 3:15) - which further goes to show that the serpent here is no mere animal but a highly intellectual being. The enmity between the serpent and the woman continues between their respective posterities: the enmity remains because God's cause stands firm. This is about as far as we can get from the text as we have it. 'She shall crush thy head, and thou shalt lie in wait for her heel', is the rendering of our Latin Bibles, and is already an interpretation. The original Hebrew text had the same word in both places: 'He shall bruise your head and you shall bruise his heel'. It might be argued that bruising the head is more fatal than a wound in the heel, and so there is a hint of future triumph of the seed of the woman. This was made more explicit in the Latin translation of St Jerome (405 A.D.), and a tradition arose of seeing in these words a first hint of victory over Satan, and the text came to be called the Protevangelium, or 'First Gospel'. Then there arose a long history of interpretation of the seed of the two posterities. For the 'seed of the devil' we can best read Jn 8:44: 'You are of your father the devil; and the desires of your father you will do...'

The seed of the woman in the supreme sense was our Lord Jesus Christ, whose coming and life, death and resurrection were the destruction of Satan's kingdom. Then it was often interpreted of our Lady, who thus came to be called the New Eve. And finally the 'seed' was also taken sometimes collectively: Christ and his brethren will together struggle against Satan. Thus St Paul says to the Romans: 'The God of peace crush Satan under your feet speedily' (Rom 16:20). And so we get a glimpse of the depths of meaning drawn from one text in the prayer and thought of the Church. This messianic prophecy is the most indeterminate, but it is also the first in a series extending over the history of the Chosen People; and we, as they did, believe in a God who 'spoke through the

prophets', or prophetic texts. [Scanner's note: Although it is unintelligible English, the multi-layered meaning of this passage, pointing both to Our Lord's and Our Lady's victory can be rendered: 'The third person singular shall bruise (or crush) the second person singular's head and the second person singular shall bruise the third person singular's heel.' Were Jerome's documents superior to the Masoretic text of the 9th century A.D.? Quite likely!]

I will multiply your pain...(3:16). The woman is to have her special trials, despite the blessing of motherhood, by God (cf. Gen. 1:28), trials in pregnancy and childbirth, and tensions that can mar the happy relationship with her partner.

...with toil...and sweat...(3:17-19). Work which was joyous activity now becomes too often a struggle for a living, with cares, anxieties, and sheer tiredness.

All this misery is linked, by the author, to a sin, voluntarily committed, a disobedience instigated by the spirit of evil. The author does not use the word 'sin' (it first appears in 4:7), but gives everything that goes to suggest it.

The Outcome or Consequences of the Fall (vv. 20-24)

...mother of all living...(3:20). Eve, and her partner Adam, have fallen and are in a wretched state before God. In this state, however, the first parents are to pass on what came to be called original sin. Eve is mother of all the living - and all the living have a stain upon them. This text also suggests that the whole human race is descended from a first couple, as is implied by St Paul. [Scanner's note: Pius XII in *Humani Generis* in 1950 most definitely taught that the whole human race is descended from a first couple.]

...the man has become like one of us...(3:22). These words are ironical [and perhaps are said that way]. In fact, far from being like God, man is now banished from the paradise of pleasure, and can never recover immortality - represented by the symbol of putting forth his hand and taking of the tree of life.

...cherubim, and a flaming sword...(3:24). At the gates of Assyrian palaces stood winged bulls, human-headed, and bronze representations of lightning, to show that entry was forbidden. Something of these images lies behind our text, which is simply trying to say that Adam and Eve were excluded from paradise, stripped once and for all of privileges and graces which had been theirs when first created by God. [Scanner's note: Assyrians had probably learnt their notions of the cherubim-like winged creatures from primitive race memories of this or similar incidents.]

THE STORY OF CAIN AND ABEL (Gen. 4:1-16)

Really to understand this well-known story of the 'first' murder, we need to realize what the author's method has been. He has got hold of an old story which told of the rivalry between nomad shepherds (Abel) and the tillers of the soil (Cain). And the story as told originally presupposed considerable development in the human race. Note how shepherding and agriculture exist (v. 2), regular worship obtains (v. 3), Cain fears other men (v. 14), Cain takes his brother into a field (v. 8) so as not to be seen by others. This original story contrasted shepherds and tillers of the soil, and favoured nomadic shepherds, for these were to have God's blessing (v. 4). Such a story might well have been current and favoured by the Israelites in their earlier nomadic history.

[Scanner's note: If, as seems likely to me, Cain was Adam's immediate son, it really was the first murder on earth. The human race has deteriorated since Adam's time not improved. This being so,

there is no difficulty in believing that these earliest humans had shepherding, agriculture and regular worship. Perhaps over later centuries much of this was lost and had to be re-learned. As for there being other men at the time, this too is highly possible as the Bible is silent about all the other children (and their children) of Adam and Eve with the exception of Seth, who is specifically mentioned as replacing Abel (4:25), and it can therefore be surmised that some sort of specific promise or blessing was given to this child from whom the Saviour was descended.]

[ I think the Church has specifically excluded the notion of Genesis characters being mere representations of tribes rather than individuals. See the Pontifical Biblical Commission 's decree of February 27, 1934 which is quoted in full in the appendix. It says in part...'{the condemned author} in his treatment of the Pentateuch follows the opinions of rationalistic criticism to the complete neglect of the decree of the Pontifical Biblical Commission of June 27, 1906;...without any attention to the decree of the same Pontifical Biblical Commission of June 23, 1905, he...{is} mingling falsehood with truth; contrary to the clear evidence of the sacred books {and} he makes, among others, the assertions that the stories about the Patriarchs, at least in large part, give the history, not of individual men, but of tribes.' These decrees are reproduced in the appendix.]

The author has taken this story and adapted it so as to present Cain as Adam's immediate son. But his real purpose was to show the connection between Adam's fall and the sin of murder. And Cain thus becomes the son of Adam. As the author was not concerned with generations and relationships, he has left the story with the tell-tale details of a later period, and furthered his theme of increasing sin among Adam's descendants. All this was to lead to the climax of the Flood (ch. 6).

...the Lord had regard for Abel, and for his offering (4:4). The narrative of our author ('Yahwist') [Scanner's note: Sic!] applies to the sacrifices of Abel and Cain the criteria of the prophets, as for example Hosea 6:6: 'I desired steadfast love and not sacrifice: and the knowledge of God rather than burnt-offerings' (cf. 1 Sam 15:22); i.e., the insistence on the interior dispositions of the heart. [Scanner's note: There is nothing untoward about the application of these criteria to Cain and Abel's sacrifice as their father had been taught the true and correct faith by God Himself.] It was taken that Abel's sacrifice was acceptable because he was a just man of good dispositions. Thus the New Testament came to speak of 'Abel, the just' (Mt. 23:35), and of his sacrifice of greater worth: 'By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain' (Heb 11:4).

...the voice of your brother's blood is crying to me from the ground (4:10). At a later period Abel became a type of the martyred servant expiating the sins of Israel through his persecution, and the first of a long line, each of whom prefigured the innocent Lamb who was slain for our redemption (cf. Hebrews 12:24: '...Jesus the mediator of the new testament, and the sprinkling of blood which speaks better than that of Abel').

If you do well, will you not be accepted?... (4:7). The general sense comes clear in the context: 'If you do well, will you not be accepted? but if you do not do well, will not sin crouch at the door? Its desire is for you, but you must master it'. Cain is subject to the pains and temptations of a son of Adam. He is cast out 'from the face of the earth' and he senses that his iniquity is beyond pardon (4:13), but God intervenes: and the Lord put a mark on Cain, lest any who came upon him should kill him (4:15). Some mark or emblem prevented Cain from falling a victim to the blood-vengeance which passed for justice in primitive societies. Cain the murderer is cursed and apart from God; yet he is cared for and guarded by God. Such a theme runs through all these chapters. Evil is done, and punished, but the loving mercy of God still provides for erring human beings.

## GENEALOGIES WITH ANCIENT TRADITIONS (Gen. 4:17-26, chapter 5, chapter 10, and 11:10-27)

You cannot read far in these early chapters of Genesis without meeting lists of Hebrew names. A hasty reader might want to 'skip'. But if we don't 'skip' we may learn something about the author's intention, and get the plan of Genesis better - and some odd information in addition. The lists are genealogies into which have been woven considerable portions of traditional knowledge. They are an attempt at representing the ages of man theologically (we do not go to Genesis for a science of human origins nor for rigorous genealogies). The author's preoccupation is with the spread of sinfulness.

Thus 4:17-26 is a genealogy of the Kenites, who were said to be descended from Cain. In this text is quite a different tradition about Cain and his descendants and no reference to Cain's crime. It is a tradition about city-builders and city culture, and smiths and musicians. Also inserted in the narrative is the 'Song of the Sword' (4:23-24), an old savage chant of revenge from a society which no longer maintained monogamy. By it the author means to show that brutality is on the increase. Lamech claims 'seventy times sevenfold vengeance', which means vengeance without limit. We can contrast that ceaseless forgiving of an offending brother which our Lord taught (Mt. 18:22).

Chapter 5 lists ten names from Adam to Noah. The author thus bridges the period from the Fall to the Flood - which last brought about a new disposition of God. The chapter is from the priestly tradition, and may originally have followed the first creation narrative (chapters 1 to 2:4a). Note the precise figures for the age of these primitive heroes, for the begetting of their sons, etc. Still the author is little concerned with precisions. He really wants to show how the measure of human life grew less and less. Thus from Adam to Noah the life-span of a man is 700-1,000 years; from Noah to Abraham (chapters 10 and 11) it is 200-600 years; the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, etc., lived 100-200 years; and finally men of his day 70-80 years. This decline in the length of life is one more way of showing how sin has affected the course of human living.

Enoch (5:22-24) is said to have 'walked with God', or in happy companionship with his Creator. The little note about Enoch is a fragment from a considerable tradition, part of which is recorded in the non-scripture book of Enoch (about 95 B.C.). 'He was not' is used of sudden, inexplicable disappearance (Is 17:14; 1 Kings 20:40). Enoch was a very great figure in Jewish tradition. 'No man was born upon earth like Enoch: for he also was taken up from the earth' (Ecclus 49:16), and thought not to have died, like Elias (Elijah) (cf. 2 Kg 2:11 - in the Douay version 4 Kings 2:11).

Chapter 10 sums up that knowledge of the ancient world which an educated Hebrew could have had about the time of Solomon; and the information in the chapter reads as if based on some very ancient world-map. [Scanner's note: not Solomon, but Moses.] It is surprising in its range of peoples and places when we remember how the Hebrews were at origin an inland people, knowing little of the sea and foreign parts. The sons of Japheth are shown as peopling Asia Minor and the isles of the Mediterranean (Javan = Ionia; Tiras = Etruscans; Elishah = Alasia = Cyprus, etc.). The sons of Ham (v. 6) people the south countries (Put = Ethiopia). Canaan is linked with Egypt because of the frequent overlordship of that country. The sons of Shem (v. 22) were Elamites, Assyrians, Arameans, etc. More important than details of identification is the theological purpose of this chapter. It follows on God's blessing of Noah and is calculated to show the fulfilment of God's command to be fruitful and multiply (9:1). God had indeed blessed Noah and his sons, and the author could say, like St Paul at Athens, 'And he made from one, every nation of men to live on all

the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their habitation' (Acts 17:26).

In 11:10-27 the author is concerned to cover the span of time, real or imagined, from the tower of Babel incident to the coming of Abraham. He is concerned too to show how from all the peoples of earth God has chosen a family, or rather a man, who would give birth to Israel. The plan of Genesis at this point converges upon Abraham, who was chosen by God to be father of the Chosen People.

#### THE FLOOD (Gen. 6:1-9:17)

With the narratives of the great Flood we reach the next great turning point in the primeval history of Genesis 1-11. Sin and widespread corruption had to be washed out. God's utter holiness and justice demanded this. But God does not condemn the innocent with the guilty, so Noah, 'a righteous man, blameless in his generation' (6:9), was accordingly saved by God.

Traditions about a great flood are common among many ancient peoples. There are notably several versions of a Babylonian flood story. Both the Genesis and Babylonian flood stories have points in common: yet neither is dependent on the other. Both sets of traditions perhaps go back to a common source in the far-off past. So much traditional evidence seems to point to an historical happening. There was perhaps a cataclysmic flood in the Mesopotamian river valleys, and it was large enough to have given rise to several narratives in different traditions. Sir Leonard Woolley found evidences of a very great flood in these regions; evidences perhaps of a flood rather than the Flood.

The historic flood was no doubt a vast yet local event. This was swollen in the traditional tellings over the centuries into something absolutely universal: and thus it appears in our Hebrew narratives. Two versions of the tradition existed; and then at some time were combined to form the text as we have it in Genesis 6:1-9:17.

[Scanner's note: It is certainly true that these chapters require very careful reading. The flood, as recorded was indeed vast and was much more than merely 'local'. Words which seem to point to a universal flood must be carefully nuanced with the rest of scripture especially with the Biblical record that certain persons who lived before Noah (and not of his family) were the ancestors of 'the tent dwellers and owners of livestock...of all who play the lyre and the flute...of all metal workers in bronze or iron.' (See 4:20-22) Thus it would seem that at least some of the members of tribes descended from these men were not drowned in the flood.]

Careful reading will show that God twice observes the wickedness of men (6:5 and 6:12); twice foretells a flood (6:13, 17 and 7:4) [Scanner's note: the second time to specifically announce on what day it would commence]; twice orders Noah to enter the ark (6:18 and 7:1), [Scanner's note: on the first occasion as a general order as to what Noah is to do in the future] and Noah twice obeys (6:22 and 7:5) [Scanner's note; the first verse telling us merely that Noah obeyed all that the Lord had ordered and the second being more chronologically specific]; twice the Flood begins (7:10 and 7:11) [Scanner's note or rather, in two consecutive sentences the author specifies the beginning of the flood in a solemn oratorical manner], and the waters increase (7:17 and 7:18), and all living things die (7:21 and 7:22) [Scanner's note: Hardly. Rather does it seem to me to be an oratorical declamation devise to stress the seriousness of the events being narrated.]. Then the duration of the Flood is of 40 days in one tradition, of 150 days in another. [Scanner's note: No. It rained for forty days and the waters did not fall till after 150 days.] These and other points all go to show that we have two narratives woven together, but they can fairly easily be set out separately.

Note that the author has placed these two narratives side by side. He made no attempt to eliminate details which clash. The stories of the Flood, roughly sewn together, were to be read as a parable of God's dealings with sinful mankind and of God's mercy.

#### Notes on the text

Genesis 6:1-4 is perhaps the most difficult passage in the Old Testament. A possible explanation is that the author is using an age-old legend about the origin of the 'giants' who were said to have a human and a more-than-human parentage. But the author of Genesis (who certainly did not accept such cock-and-bull stories) has re-used the old story to intensify the sense of spreading sin and of the deterioration of all nature. He wanted this short passage as an introduction to the Flood story. It was to be part of the evidence of mounting horror in the world of that time. [Scanner's note: The most common traditional interpretation of the Fathers is that the children of Seth are referred to as 'sons of God' being from a godly ancestor, and the children of Cain are referred to as mere 'daughters of men' being carnal in their lusts and desires. That giants or races of giant humans of some sort existed in ancient times seems beyond question.]

...the Lord was sorry that he had made man...(6:6) is a sentence which clearly shows the hand of the author who easily attributes to God very human feelings and reactions. But the author knew, as well as we know, that this was a way of speaking. To say that God repents or changes in any way amounts to saying that God is not God.

But Noah found favour in the eyes of the Lord (6:8). In a dark world soon to be destroyed the very beautiful reality of a friend of God stood out, 'a just and perfect man'.

...an ark...(6:14). It is usually thought that an ark or box-shaped boat of this size was beyond the capabilities of ancient boat-builders. But the story is a story, as we see from embarking all the animals and living creatures - there are 4,000 species of insects in Palestine alone. The mind of the author is what matters: he wanted to teach of God's loving mercy towards Noah, and explain in a simple way how animal species appeared upon earth after the Flood. [Scanner's note: To believe that in ancient times man was not capable of building a large vessel is pure arrogance. Are we not astounded at the pyramids and many other ancient artefacts? As for the number of creatures taken aboard, scholars have suggested many real possibilities. 'Kinds' are specified, not species. God could have worked certain miracles. The creatures could have been in embryo, or perhaps in some form of suspended animation. We should be loathe to too quickly dismiss elements of the story as mere fancy.]

...the windows of the heavens were opened (7:11). This is more easily imagined if we remember the world-picture of the ancient Hebrews: the solid vault of heaven with waters above which could sometimes pierce through, and so too the 'fountains of the deep' or waters beneath which could break through to earth. And this is what is imagined as having happened at the Flood. [Scanner's note: 'Windows of heaven' is doubtless as common an expression as the English 'the sun rises'. In neither case are the words literally true, but they express a reality which speakers of the language instantly recognize. Moreover, some scholars have suggested that the 'fountains of the deep' were actually huge quasi-volcanic sources of heated water and other elements beneath the crust of the earth which were released at this time to add to the cataclysmic nature of the disaster.]

And God remembered Noah, and all the beasts...that were with him...(8:1). God's remembrance of human beings is one of the great biblical ideas. God remembers his covenant with Noah (9:15),



remembers Abraham (19:29) and Rachel (30:22) and his covenant generally in Exodus 2:24, 6:5, 13:3, etc.

...the ark came to rest upon the mountains of Ararat (8:4) in the region of Armenia.

And Noah built an altar to the Lord (8:20). This part of the Flood story (8:20-9:17) has no parallels in the ancient flood stories of the Near East. The narrative here is from the priestly tradition and tells of the renewal of worship in a new, purified, world of after the Flood. God accepted the offering of Noah and 'smelled a sweet savour'.

In some ways the reader is brought back to the beginning of creation again. The command to 'be fruitful and multiply' is given anew (9:1). The beasts of the earth are to be ruled by man (9:2); yet a new note of sternness creeps in ('fear and dread of you'). It is no longer the easy and happy ordering of all under man and God as in the paradise of pleasure.

You shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood (9:4), because the ancients looked upon the blood as the seat of life, and life is a sacred thing and belongs to God alone. The blood was to be poured out like water (Deut 12:16). This regulation is at the root of present-day Jewish dietary laws, e.g. kosher meat.

Closely connected with these ideas is that of the special sacredness of human life, because man is created in the image of God and is 'a little lower than the angels'. The text here may refer to the primitive practice of blood-vengeance, or equally well to the right given to organized society to exact (even capital) punishment for homicide: Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed (9:6). Many modern societies do not use the right: but the right remains theirs, and it has a basis in Scripture.

This is the sign of the covenant...(9:12), or God's understanding with his people for all succeeding generations. And the rainbow, or gleaming light in the midst of rainstorm, is a sign of God's mercy in the midst of flood and death.

The mercy of God prevails in the end. The Flood has brought about a new age, and God has entered upon a new understanding with man.

Before continuing the story, we should glance at the place of the Flood story in Christian tradition. The first way in which it was taken is that of our Lord himself: the Flood was a judgement of God which prefigured the judgement of the last day. Cf. Lk 17:26: 'As were the days of Noah, so will be the coming of the Son of man. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, and they did not know until the flood came and swept them all away, so will be the coming of the Son of man' (Mt. 24:37-39).

Another New Testament tradition stresses rather the saving of Noah. The salvation that was Noah's, prefigures the salvation that comes through the waters of Baptism. This appears in the much quoted text of 1 Peter 3:20-21. To these better known usages of the Flood story, we should add a reference to the saving mercy of God in 2 Peter 2:4-9; and to the Deluge as fulfilling God's purposes in 2 Peter 3:3-10.

**AFTER THE FLOOD: Two stories**

(a) Noah's curse and blessing (Gen. 9:18-29)

After a brief note about the peopling of the whole earth from the three sons of Noah (9:18-19), we then pass to an old story of Noah as husbandman and vine grower, and then also the first (for there must have been a first) to discover the potency of wine. Classical parallels to this story have been found recently on a site in Cyprus: a mosaic of the two 'first to drink wine', and both are represented as tipsy. But the story as we have it in Genesis is more particularly Hebrew in showing the irrevocable character of a father's curse or blessing. It represented in effect God's will coming into play. Ham is the undutiful or disrespectful son (religious Hebrews had a horror of nudity), and Canaan (his descendant) is cursed. The ancestor stands for the whole people of Canaan, who were notoriously unchaste. Israelites in all their history were warned against Canaanite excesses.

(b) The Tower of Babel story (Gen. 11:1-9)

...the whole earth had one language and few words (11:1). The narrator of the story means some large portion of the earth.

Scattering over the earth had already taken place. The background of this story is wholly Babylonian, and adds very much to the impression that many of these traditions in the early part of Genesis (1-11) came over into Palestine (with Abraham?) from Mesopotamia.

...brick for stone and bitumen for mortar (11: 3), is the reflection of a Palestinian writer who little understands this way of building, so unlike his own (the hills of Judah are rich in fair white building stone). [Scanners note: Stone was the common building block of Egypt in earlier times, so Fr Potter's comment is equally applicable to an Egyptian writer such as Moses.]

The tower was to have its 'top in the heavens' - presumably the vault of heaven or firmament in the Hebrew sense is meant. But even so it is an exaggeration in the telling of the story, for it is a kind of wonder-story based on an historical reality. [Scanner's note: 'top in the heavens' is equally likely to be an ancient colloquial expression similar to the modern 'sky-scraper' which does not literally scrape any sky.] There is a recollection of the Babylonian Ziggurat (or Ziggurat), or lofty pyramid-like tower (thought to be the abode of a god). But the story came to be incorporated in Genesis as an old folk-tradition calculated to explain the differences in language among the peoples of the world. The theory was that originally language was one. But God punished mankind by scattering them over the world and making them unable to communicate with one another. 'Babel' is a play on words, and is taken by a sort of popular etymology to be a form of balal, or confuse, in Hebrew.

Whatever the old traditions about languages, the author of Genesis used the story as an example of human pride and of the sin of Adam once again renewed. 'Let us make a name for ourselves' is an ugly sentiment, and, more serious still, the people were bent on disposing of their own destinies without acknowledging their utter dependence on God. It is in effect the sin of Adam over again.

The primeval history, as we have it in Genesis 1-11, ends on this note of failure and human arrogance. The renewal after the Flood and the fresh hopes springing from God's covenant have ended thus. It is ever the same human story. Only the intervention of God in the call of Abraham (Gen. 12) becomes a source of new and lasting hope for the world.

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[The following Appendix has been added by the Scanner:]

APPENDIX

Magisterial Teaching on the Interpretation of Genesis from the Pontifical Biblical Commission

[In the following, all emphases are not in the original, but are the work of the Scanner, whose comments are in square brackets.]

[The following abbreviations are used: ASS: Acta Sedis Sanctae; AAS: Acta Apostolicae Sedis; EB: Enchiridion Biblicum; Dz: Denzinger ]

[On Narratives Historical only in Appearance in Books of Holy Scripture Historical in Form ]

June 23, 1905 (ASS 38 {1905-06} 124f; EB 154; Dz 1980)

[A question is asked and an answer is given.]

Is it possible to admit as a principle of sound exegesis that books of sacred Scripture which are regarded as historical, at times do not relate, either wholly or in part, history properly so-called and objectively true, but present only the appearance of history with the purpose of expressing some meaning differing from the strictly literal or historical sense of the words?

Answer: In the negative, except in a case neither easily nor rashly to be admitted, in which the mind of the Church not being contrary and without prejudice to its judgement, it is proved by solid arguments that the sacred Writer intended not to recount true history, properly so-called, but under the guise and form of history to set forth a parable, an allegory, or some meaning distinct from the strictly literal or historical signification of the words.

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[On the Mosaic Authorship of the Pentateuch]

June 27, 1906 (ASS 39 {1906-07} 377f; EB 174-176; Dz 1997ff)

I: [The answer to the first question is 'No'.]

Are the arguments gathered by critics to impugn the Mosaic authorship of the sacred books designated by the name of the Pentateuch of such weight in spite of the cumulative evidence of many passages of both Testaments, the unbroken unanimity of the Jewish people, and furthermore of the constant tradition of the Church besides the internal indications furnished by the text itself, as to justify the statement that these books are not of Mosaic authorship but were put together from sources mostly of post-Mosaic date? Answer: In the negative.

II: [This next Question has two parts. 'No' is the answer to the first. 'Yes' is the answer to the second.]

Does the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch necessarily imply a production of the whole work of such a character as to impose the belief that each and every word was written by Moses' own hand or was by him dictated to secretaries; ['No' is the answer.] or is it a legitimate hypothesis that he conceived the work himself under the guidance of divine inspiration and then entrusted the writing of it to one or more persons, with the understanding that they reproduced his thoughts with fidelity and neither wrote nor omitted anything contrary to his will, and that finally the work composed after this fashion was approved by Moses, its principal and inspired author, and was published under his name? ['Yes' is the answer.] Answer: In the negative to the first and in the affirmative to the second part.

III: [The Answer is 'Yes' to the third question.]

Without prejudice to the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch, may it be granted that in the composition of his work Moses used sources, written documents namely or oral traditions, from which in accordance with the special aim he entertained and under the guidance of divine inspiration he borrowed material and inserted it in his work either word for word or in substance, either abbreviated or amplified? Answer: In the affirmative.

IV: [Question 4 is answered 'Yes, with a condition'.]

Subject to the Mosaic authorship and the integrity of the Pentateuch being substantially safeguarded, may it be admitted that in the protracted course of centuries certain modifications befell it, such as: additions made after the death of Moses by an inspired writer, or glosses and explanations inserted in the text, certain words and forms changed from archaic into more recent speech, finally incorrect readings due to the fault of scribes which may be the subject of inquiry and judgement according to the laws of textual criticism? Answer In the affirmative, saving the judgement of the Church.

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Pope Pius X, *Motu Proprio Praestantia Scripturae*, 18 Nov. 1907 (ASS 40 {1907} 724ff; EB nn. 278f; Dz 2113f): “We now declare and expressly enjoin that all Without exception are bound by an obligation of conscience to submit to the decisions of the Pontifical Biblical Commission, whether already issued or to be issued hereafter, exactly as to the decrees of the Sacred Congregations which are on matters of doctrine and approved by the Pope; nor can anyone who by word or writing attacks the said decrees avoid the note both of disobedience and of rashness or be therefore without grave fault.” [Thus the Pontifical Biblical Commission's answers have a profound objectivity in any Catholic's appreciation of Sacred Scripture.]

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[Concerning the Historical Character of the First Three Chapters of Genesis]

June 30, 1909 (AAS 1 {1909} 567ff; EB 332-339; Dz 2121ff)

I: [Question 1 has 'No' as the answer.]

Do the various exegetical systems excogitated and defended under the guise of science to exclude the literal historical sense of the first three chapters of Genesis rest on a solid foundation? Answer: In the negative.

II: [Question 2 has 'No' as the answer to both parts.]

Notwithstanding the historical character and form of Genesis, the special connection of the first three chapters with one another and with the following chapters, the manifold testimonies of the Scriptures both of the Old and of the New Testaments, the almost unanimous opinion of the holy Fathers and the traditional view which the people of Israel also has handed on and the Church has always held, may it be taught that: the aforesaid three chapters of Genesis Contain not accounts of actual events, accounts, that is, which correspond to objective reality and historical truth, [The answer is 'No'.] but, either fables derived from the mythologies and cosmogonies of ancient peoples and accommodated by the sacred writer to monotheistic doctrine after the expurgation of any polytheistic error; or allegories and symbols without any foundation in objective reality proposed under the form of history to inculcate religious and philosophical truths; or finally legends in part

historical and in part fictitious freely composed with a view to instruction and edification? [The Answer is 'No'.] Answer: In the negative to both parts.

III: [Question 3 has 'No' for its answer.]

In particular may the literal historical sense be called in doubt in the case of facts narrated in the same chapters which touch the foundations of the Christian religion: as are, among others, the creation of all things by God in the beginning of time; the special creation of man; the formation of the first woman from the first man; the unity of the human race; the original felicity of our first parents in the state of justice, integrity, and immortality; the command given by God to man to test his obedience; the transgression of the divine command at the instigation of the devil under the form of a serpent; the degradation of our first parents from that primeval state of innocence; and the promise of a future Redeemer? Answer: In the negative.

IV: [Question 4 is answered 'Yes'.]

In the interpretation of those passages in these chapters which the Fathers and Doctors understood in different manners without proposing anything certain and definite, is it lawful, without prejudice to the judgement of the Church and with attention to the analogy of faith, to follow and defend the opinion that commends itself to each one? Answer: In the affirmative.

V: [Question 5 is answered 'No'.]

Must each and every word and phrase occurring in the aforesaid chapters always and necessarily be understood in its literal sense, so that it is never lawful to deviate from it, even when it appears obvious that the diction is employed in an applied sense, either metaphorical or anthropomorphical, and either reason forbids the retention or necessity imposes the abandonment of the literal sense? Answer: In the negative.

VI: [Question 6 has 'Yes' for its answer.]

Provided that the literal and historical sense is presupposed, may certain passages in the same chapters, in the light of the example of the holy Fathers and of the Church itself, be wisely and profitably interpreted in an allegorical and prophetic sense? Answer: In the affirmative.

VII: [Question 7 has 'No' for its answer]

As it was not the mind of the sacred author in the composition of the first chapter of Genesis to give scientific teaching about the internal Constitution of visible things and the entire order of creation, but rather to communicate to his people a popular notion in accord with the current speech of the time and suited to the understanding and capacity of men, must the exactness of scientific language be always meticulously sought for in the interpretation of these matters? Answer: In the negative.

VIII: [Question 8 has the answer 'Yes'.]

In the designation and distinction of the six days mentioned in the first chapter of Genesis may the word Yom (day) be taken either in the literal sense for the natural day or in an applied sense for a certain space of time, and may this question be the subject of free discussion among exegetes? Answer: In the affirmative.

February 27, 1934 (AAS 26 {1934} 130f)

As the question has been addressed to this Pontifical Biblical Commission what is to be thought of the work entitled *Die Einwanderung Israels in Kanaan*, published at Breslau in the year 1933 by R. D. Frederic Schmidtke, it has decided that the following answer should be given:

R. D. Frederic Schmidtke, Professor Extraordinary of the Old Testament in the Theological Faculty of the University of Breslau in the volume mentioned above: in his treatment of the Pentateuch follows the opinions of rationalistic criticism to the complete neglect of the decree of the Pontifical Biblical Commission of June 27, 1906; moreover, in the history of the Old Testament, without any attention to the decree of the same Pontifical Biblical Commission of June 23, 1905, he introduces a type of literature consisting of popular traditions mingling falsehood with truth; contrary to the clear evidence of the sacred books. He makes, among others, the assertions that the stories about the Patriarchs, at least in large part, give the history, not of individual men, but of tribes; that Jacob was not the son of Isaac, but represents some Aramean tribe; that the whole people of Israel did not enter Egypt but a part only, in particular the tribe of Joseph; also, doing violence to the sacred text, he explains many miracles of the Old Testament as purely natural events.

The author, consequently, at least implicitly, denies the dogma of biblical inspiration and inerrancy; he entirely neglects the norms of Catholic hermeneutics; he contradicts the Catholic doctrine most clearly set forth in the Encyclicals *Providentissimus Deus* of Leo XIII and *Spiritus Paraclitus* of Benedict XV.

Hence the aforesaid work deserves reprobation on various grounds and should be kept out of Catholic schools.

The Pontifical Commission, moreover, takes this occasion to warn Catholic commentators to obey with due reverence the dogmatic Constitution of the Vatican Council [of 1870], renewing the Decree of the sacred Council of Trent, by which it was solemnly ordained "that in matters of faith and morals, appertaining to the building up of Christian doctrine, that is to be held as the true sense of sacred Scripture which was, and is, held by our holy mother the Church, to whom it belongs to judge of the true sense and interpretation of the holy Scriptures, and therefore no one may interpret holy Scripture contrary to this sense or also against the unanimous consent of the Fathers".

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Letter to Cardinal Suhard [on the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch, and on the historical character of Gen. 1-11]

(AAS 40 [1948] 45-8)

The Holy Father graciously entrusted to the Pontifical Biblical Commission the examination of two questions recently submitted to His Holiness concerning the sources of the Pentateuch and the historicity of the first eleven chapters of Genesis. As the result of their deliberations His Holiness deigned to approve the following reply, on 16 January 1948.

The Pontifical Biblical Commission desires to promote biblical studies by assuring to them the most complete liberty within the limits of the traditional teaching of the Church. This liberty has been proclaimed in explicit terms by the present Pope [Pius XII] in his Encyclical *Divino afflante Spiritu*: "The Catholic exegete ought not by any manner of means to debar himself from taking in hand, and that repeatedly, the difficult questions which have found no solution up to the present time, in an

attempt to find a well-founded explanation in perfect harmony with the doctrine of the Church, in particular with that of biblical inerrancy, and at the same time capable of fully satisfying the certain conclusions of the secular sciences. The labours of these worthy workers in the vineyard of the Lord deserve to be judged not only with equity and justice, but with perfect charity; and this is a point which all others sons of the Church should bear in mind. It is their duty to avoid that most imprudent zeal which considers it an obligation to attack or suspect whatever is new", AAS (1943) 319.

If this recommendation of the Pope's is borne in mind in the interpretation of the three official replies given formerly by the Biblical Commission in connection with the above-mentioned questions, namely June 23, 1905, on narratives in the historical books of Holy Scripture which have only the appearance of history (EB 154), June 27, 1906, on the Mosaic authenticity of the Pentateuch (EB 174-7), and June 30, 1909, on the historical character of the first three chapters of Genesis (EB 332-9), it will be agreed that these replies are in no way a hindrance to further truly scientific examination of these problems in accordance with the results acquired in these last forty years.

As regards the composition of the Pentateuch, in the above-mentioned decree of June 27, 1906, the Biblical Commission recognized already that it could be affirmed that Moses "in order to compose his work made use of written documents or of oral traditions" and that post-Mosaic modifications and additions could also be admitted (EB 176-7). No one today doubts the existence of these sources or rejects a gradual increase of Mosaic laws due to the social and religious conditions of later times, a process manifest also in the historical narratives. However, even among non-Catholic exegetes very diverse opinions are held today concerning the character and the number of these documents, their names and dates. There are even authors in different countries, who for purely critical and historical reasons quite unconnected with any religious purpose resolutely reject the theories most in favour up to the present, and seek the explanation of certain editorial peculiarities of the Pentateuch, not so much in the alleged diversity of documents as in the special psychology, the peculiar mental and literary processes of the ancient Orientals which are better known today, or again in the different literary forms which are required by the diversity of subject-matter. Hence we invite Catholic scholars to study these problems with an open mind in the light of sane criticism and of the results of other sciences which have their part in these matters, and such study will without doubt establish the large share and the profound influence of Moses as author and as legislator.

The question of the literary forms of the first eleven chapters of Genesis is far more obscure and complex. These literary forms do not correspond to any of our classical categories and cannot be judged in the light of the Greco-Latin or modern literary types. It is therefore impossible to deny or to affirm their historicity as a whole without unduly applying to them norms of a literary type under which they cannot be classed. If it is agreed not to see in these chapters history in the classical and modern sense, it must be admitted also that known scientific facts do not allow a positive solution of all the problems which they present. The first duty in this matter incumbent on scientific exegesis consists in the careful study of all the problems literary, scientific, historical, cultural, and religious connected with these chapters; in the next place is required a close examination of the literary methods of the ancient oriental peoples, their psychology, their manner of expressing themselves and even their notion of historical truth. The requisite, in a word, is to assemble without pre-formed judgements all the material of the palaeontological and historical, epigraphical and literary sciences. It is only in this way that there is hope of attaining a clearer view of the true nature of certain

narratives in the first chapters of Genesis. To declare a priori that these narratives do not contain history in the modern sense of the word might easily be understood to mean that they do not contain history in any sense, whereas they relate in simple and figurative language, adapted to the understanding of mankind at a lower stage of development, the fundamental truths underlying the divine scheme of salvation, as well as a popular description of the origins of the human race and of the chosen people. In the meantime it is necessary to practise patience which is part of prudence and the wisdom of life. This also is inculcated by the Holy Father in the Encyclical already quoted: "No one", he says, "should be surprised that all the difficulties have not yet been clarified or solved. But that is no reason for losing courage or forgetting that in the branches of human study it cannot be otherwise than in nature, where beginnings grow little by little, where the produce of the soil is not gathered except after prolonged labour. There is ground, therefore, for hoping that (these difficulties) which today appear most complicated and arduous, will eventually, thanks to constant effort, admit of complete clarification" (AAS [1943] 318).

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[The scanner humbly submits that since that time, the flaws and arbitrary anti-divine presuppositions of the Dibelius 'four -source' school of historical biblical criticism have increasingly been exposed.]

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