



Some Lessons From Genesis



Father Bruce Vawter, C.M.

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Some Lessons from Genesis

by

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CONTENTS

GOD REVEALED	5
History of Salvation	6
What God Had Done.	6
Genesis, The Beginning	7
The Lessons of Genesis	9
Spirit and Matter	11
What is Inspiration?	12
MAN, AS HE WAS.	13
The Two Stories of Creation	14
God is a Person.	15
The Role of Science	16
GOD KNOWN	19
Reason and Faith	20
Knowing God Through Reason.	21
There Must be a First Cause.	22
REASON AND REVELATION.	25
Faith is Reasonable.	25
The Meaning of Suffering.	26
The Natural Law	27
Human Law	29
The Natural Law and Revelation	30
MAN, AS HE IS	31
The Tree of Life	31
The Meaning of Marriage.	32
The Destiny of Man	34
THE FRIENDSHIP OF GOD: LOST AND RESTORED	35
Original Sin	35
The Nature of Sin.	36
Man the Enigma.	37
Do Angels Exist?	38
Mankind before Christ	39
Salvation before Christ	41
ABOUT THE AUTHOR.	43

I

GOD REVEALED

There is a knowledge of God that goes beyond what can be or is known about Him simply from reason. It is true, reason alone can tell us of the existence of God and about some of His attributes. It is also true that the almost universal agreement of sages throughout the ages on this point is an important consideration. I would not want to minimize the importance of this, and later on we shall have something to say about the “God of the philosophers.” At the same time, however, I am very sure that very few persons, apart from revelation, would be able to tell you why they believe in God. It is one thing to say that *reason can* show the existence of God, and another thing to expect the average person to be able to formulate a convincing argument.

In any case, for reasons that I will give in a moment, reason is not sufficient to tell us all that we need to know about God. Revelation alone can do this. It is the God of revelation, not of reason only, that we worship in the Catholic religion, and therefore it is about Him that we must speak first and foremost. As He has revealed Himself, we know Him as the One who has not only made man but has given him a destiny above all of his natural powers. Having given man this destiny, He has continually been present to man throughout his history, making known to him the means by which he may acquire this destiny

and saving him from the consequences of his sin which would block him forever from this destiny.

History of Salvation

For this reason, it is not difficult to see why revealed religion is frequently called the “history of salvation:” it is the record of God’s interventions in the world of man and woman. This quality of history distinguishes revealed religion from natural religion (such as that of paganism), which tries to find religious values in nature and reason alone. Paganism is not, of course, always an evil thing, though it too often comes to wrong conclusions about what is good and evil. It is always an inadequate religion, however, since it is only in revelation that God has made Himself known completely.

But how has God made Himself known? Do we mean by revelation that God has actually spoken to certain people at definite times in history?

That is part of it, of course. When we say that “God speaks,” we do not necessarily mean that He has visibly appeared and made use of human speech as his own, though naturally He can do this too. God has revealed Himself in many ways during the course of history. One outstanding way was through the Prophets, those whom He especially singled out to be His voice to His people, who made known His will in their own language – the language of an Isaiah, an Amos, a Jeremiah – but with the unshakable knowledge that they were speaking the word of God.

What God Has Done

God has also revealed Himself in what He has done: the great deeds by which He delivered Israel in the Exodus from Egypt, by which He punished and regenerated His people, also made known Who and What He is – a God of justice, mercy, love, salvation. His final complete revelation took place in Jesus Christ: in what Jesus did and said, God showed Himself in the most perfect way actually living and acting among us. This is why the evangelist John calls Jesus the Word of God, for He is God’s revelation in the deepest possible sense.

The written record of salvation history – the history of revelation – is the Bible. It is in the Bible that we can read the particulars of this history. In the Old Testament we are told of its beginning in God's dealings with the people of Israel; in the New Testament we read of its culmination in God's revelation of Himself in Jesus Christ.

The history is still going on, of course, in the Church which Christ founded, and will go on until the end of time on this earth. Because the written record is of such importance to any history, I recommend that you become as familiar with the Bible as you can. The Bible is, of course, a big proposition, and we cannot do more than refer to parts of it now and then. What I propose to do is to see what it has to tell us about the nature of God and man, and their relation to each other, as they are portrayed for us in the first chapters of the Book of Genesis.

Genesis, The Beginning

Can we really look on the first chapters of Genesis as history? They are not history in the modern sense of the word, that is true. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that they are not historical writing in the modern sense of the word. Nevertheless, in a very true sense they do deserve the name of history, for they are the record of an historical revelation.

Perhaps I can make this clearer by an explanation of the role that the Book of Genesis plays in the Bible. As you may know, Genesis is part of what we call the Pentateuch, that is, what the people of the Old Testament knew as the five books of the Law of Moses. Traditionally, the Pentateuch is attributed to the authorship of Moses, the great Prophet through whom God first revealed the religion of Israel.

Modern Biblical scholarship has clarified for us how we are to understand this authorship that Moses has exercised over the Pentateuch. It is not that he is the literary author of everything that is contained in it; rather, he is the one who is ultimately responsible for it as author, lawgiver, and founder of the Israelite religion.

As a written document the Pentateuch is the product not only of the original impetus given it by Moses, but also of Israel's experience

of God's revelation in subsequent history and prophecy. The inspired Israelite authors who produced the written Pentateuch were able, therefore, to draw a picture of God as He had revealed Himself throughout this history. It is for this reason that we can say that the teaching of the introductory chapters of Genesis is historical. They are the preface to the history that is to follow, and they could not have been written had this history not occurred.

Is Genesis talking about facts that actually took place, even though there were no historical sources available concerning these facts?

That is precisely the situation. In the sense that history is the remembered past, we could hardly speak of these chapters as history. Who, after all, remembered the creation of the world before man even came into existence? But, on the other hand, for all of its facts Genesis is dependent on someone who remembered everything well, namely God Himself, Who had revealed these facts.

The form in which these facts are conveyed is, of course, a different matter. The narratives of Genesis are not eyewitness records; they are stories by which Israelite authors taught truths known through historical revelation. As the Pontifical Biblical Commission stated in 1948: "they relate in simple and figurative language, adapted to the understanding of a less developed people, the fundamental truths presupposed for the economy of salvation, as well as the popular description of the origin of the human race and of the Chosen People."

In the first chapter of Genesis, for example, we have a poetical representation of the formation of the visible world and its inhabitants in six days. What is historical here is what is taught us about God, His creation, and His Creatures – truly the beginning of the history of the human race and of the Chosen People, which is the subject of the book of Genesis and the rest of the Pentateuch. We are not taught by the Bible, however, that the universe came about all in six days: this detail is merely part of the story which Genesis used to tell its truths, a story which pictured God as working just as any good Israelite would, performing his labor on six days and resting on the seventh.

The ancient Israelite authors did not know, as we now know, that the process during which the universe was in the making extended over literally millions of years. In 1951 Pope Pius XII addressed the Pontifical Academy of Sciences, expressing the hope that science might eventually be able to “pinpoint” the beginning of the universe – some ten to a hundred billion years ago! But even if the Biblical authors had known such things, they would not necessarily have written other than they did. This was not the history with which they were concerned. As the Biblical Commission ruled as early as 1909, it was not “the intention of the sacred author, when writing the first chapter of Genesis, to teach us in a scientific manner the innermost nature of visible things and to present the complete order of creation, but rather to furnish his people with a popular account, such as the common parlance of that age allowed.”

Thus, though the story of the first chapter of Genesis is “adapted to the understanding of a less developed people,” it is adapted to our own understanding as well. It still tells its simple yet profound truths in language that all can understand, quite independently of whatever may be their degree of scientific knowledge.

The Lessons of Genesis

What do you think is the most important lesson of the creation story? I think the most impressive thing, at any rate, is the way God is pictured as simply calling things into being by His simple command. “God said, ‘Let there be’...” and there it was!

Genesis teaches us first of all that God is Creator of all things; this itself is a truth to which the greatest minds in pagan antiquity did not attain. He has brought all things into being by the simple act of His will – light, the earth and the heavens, plant and animal life, everything. In detailing the various items of God’s creation, Genesis describes the visible universe as it was then thought to be – therefore in a quite unscientific fashion. The ancients thought of the sky, for example, as a “firmament,” a solid something that held up the “waters above the earth,” the source of the rain that occasionally fell on the earth beneath. But, as we just saw, these conceptions have nothing to do with the teaching of Genesis.

Not only has God created everything, however, but also “God saw that it was good.” Creation is not, as some pagan philosophers thought, some kind of blind emanation from a divine principle; God willed it. Neither is it something that He made in an idle moment, so to speak. He has deliberately created for a good purpose: the divine goodness has burst forth into creative act, producing what is good. Here, too, is a truth that has often eluded mankind unaided by divine revelation: there is nothing evil in the material world as such.

A false opposition between “spirit” and “matter” has sometimes led people to equate the latter with evil, as though evil were something natural and not due instead to the free choice of the human will. Biblical religion will have nothing to do with such a determinism, which can end in justifying any kind of depraved conduct and make a monstrosity of both the universe and God. As one of the wise of Israel said, “God made man simple; man’s complex problems are of his own devising” (Ecclesiastes 7:29). The material universe is good because it is the creation of a good God: it is His reflection. In the same way, we recognize a thing as just, honest, and the like, to the extent that it reflects the nature of its Creator.

We speak of God as “spiritual” and not material. Just what is meant by that? “God is spirit, and they who worship him must worship in spirit and in truth” (John 4:24). Yes, God above all is spiritual, though there are also other spirits, and man’s soul is likewise spiritual.

At the beginning of Genesis we read that “the spirit of God was stirring above the waters” (Genesis 1:2) of the chaos from which He organized the visible world. Since “spirit” means “breath” or “wind,” we have here a picture of the creative power of God blowing over the unorganized elements of creation like a mighty wind. “Spirit” is a common Biblical word for life or the cause of life, since breath was above all the sign of life. “I will bring spirit into you, that you may come to life,” God says to the Israel that was declining in exile (Ezekiel 37:5). Since all life comes from God, He above all is spirit and is habitually called spirit. Of course, it was only in the New Testament revelation that it was made known that the Spirit of God is a distinct Person related to others in the one divine nature. Throughout the Old

Testament period, “spirit of God” simply means God Himself, especially as He is life-giving.

Spirit and Matter

Spirit, therefore, has always been distinguished from matter. When we say that the material is not evil, since it is God’s creation, we do not, however, say that it is perfect. Rather, the material depends upon the spiritual for its existence. The material universe reflects its Creator because He has sent forth His spirit to give it life.

The less a being is made up of matter – the more spiritual he is, in this sense – the more perfect he is. So it is with God. Despite the fact that the Bible so frequently speaks of God in human terms – His “arm” or “hand,” for example, to signify the exercise of His power – it also makes it perfectly clear that these are simply expressive figures of speech designed to make things more understandable by use of familiar comparisons. God is pure spirit; in Him there is nothing material.

When the Prophet Isaiah wished to tell his people of the powerlessness of their enemies as opposed to the all-powerful God whom they worshipped, he said: “The Egyptians are men, not God; their horses are flesh, not spirit” (Isaiah 31:3). Human terms may be used to describe God, but He is always known to be quite distinct from man, and His essential spirituality is the basis of the distinction.

Is the same spirit involved when we speak of the Bible as “inspired”? Yes, indeed. Just as the spirit of God gives life to all things, it also causes human agents to perform actions that are above their natural powers; it is the principle of special vital activities, in other words. “The spirit of the Lord God is upon me,” says the Prophet, “to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners” (Isaiah 61:1). He means that he has been given the gift of prophecy, to speak in the name of God rather than his own.

Similarly, the Bible says that “all Scripture is inspired by God and useful for teaching, for reproving, etc.” (2 Timothy 3:16). What we translate as “inspired by God” means, literally, “God-breathed” or “produced by the spirit of God”; in other words, it has been produced

by a special divine act that makes it different from all other writings, the word of God as well as the word of man.

What is Inspiration?

The Bible does not tell us much about the nature of inspiration, only that it is a fact. As is true of so many other things that God has made known to us, the fact of inspiration must be the subject of our continual thought and contemplation, in the process of what we call “theology.”

Theology, which literally means “the science of God,” is more comprehensively defined as “the science of faith.” It is man’s duty, as a rational being, not only to accept and believe the truths that God has made known to him in revelation, but also to try to understand them to the extent that this is possible. I say “to the extent that this is possible,” because so much of divine revelation consists of truths that cannot be completely grasped by our created minds – it is for this reason, of course, that they must be revealed to us. These we call “mysteries”: though we accept them as facts on the authority of God revealing, they still remain mysterious in many details. In His goodness God has permitted us by faith to enter into the sphere of His own divine knowledge to the degree that this is a possibility for us.

Inspiration is one of these mysteries. We know the fact: the Bible which is obviously a work of many human minds is also in a very special way an expression of the divine mind. It is God’s word. By what process has this taken place? We do not know exactly, but somehow God has made use of human authors to bring it about that what He wished to be written has been written, and written in the way that He intended. I stress the fact that it is human authors He used, not merely the shells of human beings. That is to say, if we are to know what the inspired word of God means, we must interpret the inspired human mind that produced it: it is only in this way that God has given us the Scriptural word. Because it is God’s word, we know that it cannot teach us error. But we know, too, that it has been produced by human authors who wrote as any other human authors do and who, for that matter, were not necessarily aware that they were writers inspired by God.

II

MAN, AS HE WAS

We have seen something of what revelation teaches us concerning the nature of God, especially as He is portrayed in the creation story of Genesis. We are also told by the same source something about the nature of man.

The Bible says God created man “in His image and likeness.” Since God has no body as we do, “image and likeness” can hardly refer to any external appearance. Moreover, if there is one thing that Biblical man was sure about, it was the impossibility of representing God in any material form: the Law of Moses forbade anyone to attempt it (Exodus 20:5) No, man’s likeness to God obviously consisted in something other than this in the mind of the Biblical author. Let us try to see what it was.

First of all, note that in the first chapter of Genesis the creation of man is described last of all, in a place of special emphasis, and it is explicitly said that man is to have dominion over the rest of creation. Furthermore, God is poetically represented as taking counsel with Himself before proceeding to this final act of creation – “Let us make mankind” – once again to stress its special importance. At least partly, therefore, this is what the author of Genesis was thinking of when he said that man is like God. Like God, man has a place of supremacy in his own order. Just as God is supreme over all things, man is supreme over visible creation: it has been made for him. By the same token, he has been created totally different from the rest of animal creation, despite the fact that he shares creaturehood in common with it.

This same truth is brought out even more forcefully in the second chapter of Genesis, another creation story in which another order of events is followed, differing from the six-days outline of chapter one. This second creation story has been combined with the first by the inspired author of Genesis because it introduces the story of the Fall of man in chapter three, to which we will return later.

In this story (beginning in v. 4), the creation of man is represented as taking place before that of the animals, and almost immediately we see the reason for this. For the author pictures all the animals of the earth being paraded in front of man that he may give each its name. This again signifies his dominion over creation and brings out at the same time in a striking way that “he found no helper like himself.” Man and the beasts are altogether different, you see. Only at the end does God give him a “helper like himself” when He creates woman “bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh.”

The Two Stories of Creation

Thus we see why this second creation story has separated the creation of man and woman, while the first story had them created at the same time: “God created man in his image... Man and female he created them” (Genesis 1:27). The separate creations described in a second story not only bring out better the distinct human nature that man and woman share apart from all other creation, but the author also uses the story to illustrate the truth that the institution of monogamous and stable marriage follows from man’s very nature: “For this reason a man leaves his father and mother, and clings to his wife and the two become one flesh” (Genesis 2:24).

If we ask ourselves what it is about man that is God-like, what constitutes him as one capable of sharing in the dominion of the world, we shall find no difficulty in determining this to be man’s spiritual nature which he has in common with God, his intellect and free will. That man, creature of flesh though he may be, is also a creature of mind and will, is an evident truth found on virtually every page of the Bible.

What is meant when the Bible pictures man as formed from the dust of the ground with the breath of life having been breathed in his nostrils by God (Genesis 2:7)? The “breath of life” of which the text speaks here means only life itself, which man shares in common with the rest of the animals (see Ecclesiastes 3:19). In older translations of the Bible we are likely to read in this verse of Genesis that as a result of the life-breath “man became a living soul.” However, the word translated “soul” means nothing more or less than “a living being,” and

so it is given in most modern versions of the Bible. The Bible has a less scientific way of analyzing man's nature than we have, and much less sophisticated terminology. However, we are not being false to its meaning when we use the language that is familiar to us in order to speak of man's spiritual soul, his intellect, and his will.

You have noticed, of course, that this second creation story is also somewhat less sophisticated in its language than the first story. Here God is represented much more in what the theologians call "anthropomorphic" fashion, that is, He is described with human traits. Rather than create simply by the act of His will as in the first story, here He "forms" man out of clay, "breathes" into his nostrils, "plants" a garden, and so forth.

God is a Person

From one point of view, of course, this is a rather primitive way of talking about God. On the other hand, the author has had a very good purpose in using these figures of speech. By their means he brings out the profound truth that God is really a Person, someone who takes a genuine interest in the world and man that He has created, someone whom man can encounter in prayer and in the actions of his daily life. Again we can say that such a conception of God was virtually unknown in the ancient world outside of the Bible.

Language of this kind tends to be avoided as our thinking about God becomes more philosophic or scientific. We know – and Biblical man knew, too – that it cannot adequately describe the mysterious realities of the divine Being that is so far above our own. Nevertheless, no matter how scientific our knowledge becomes, we find that we cannot ever avoid such language entirely if we are to think and speak of God. It makes Him understandable to us in the only terms that we readily recognize, which are those of our own human experience.

What is figurative about the story holds for man just as it does for God. The Bible is not teaching us that the first man was actually shaped out of clay and that the first woman was formed from one man's ribs. As we have already seen, the purpose of the description of the

creation of woman is a highly religious one, to insist on the fact that she shares with man the same human nature, “made in his image and likeness,” so to speak. Neither is the Bible really concerned with the “mechanics” of man’s creation. The figure of man as taken from the earth does, of course, emphasize his lowliness in contrast with God. All the more wonderful that the Creator should take an interest in someone of such humble origin!

No, the Bible has nothing to say about the physical process by which man was created, or about the time it may have taken, just as it says nothing about the vast ages during which the universe was in formation. These are questions which would never have occurred to the inspired authors of the Bible. What they are interested in are the revealed truths concerning God and man and their mutual relations which natural science has no way of knowing.

The Role of Science

Science can analyze man chemically and can measure his intelligence against that of the other animals. It can classify him in many ways. But it cannot either confirm or deny the all-important fact that revelation tells us about man: that he has been made in the image and likeness of God, that he has in him a spark of the divine. The verification of such a fact simply lies outside the competence of science, for which reason it is simply nonsense to object that man’s possession of a spiritual soul is “unscientific.” Of course it is unscientific; science can no more measure a spiritual soul than it can weigh an idea or dissect a thought.

But it is not anti-scientific, any more than it is anti-religious, to classify man scientifically as an animal or to examine the physical structure of his body from the standpoint of its chemical composition. Both approaches to the study of man are quite legitimate and quite important. It was in the unscientific approach that Genesis was interested, to tell us what science could never tell us about man.

Within reason, religion places no obstacles to our accepting what science has to say about the biological evolution of man from some

lower form of life. I say “within reason” not to suggest that there is anything unreasonable about the scientific theory of evolution as it is generally proposed today; as a matter of fact, there seems to be a great number of reasons that urge us to accept it. I mean only that we must recognize the limitations of science. It can compare one form of life with another, and find the probable origin of the one in the other, only within the area of what it is competent to measure and analyze. It is not competent, for example, to rule concerning the origin of the human soul – that which, according to religion, makes man what he is.

Provided, therefore, that the scientific view is accepted for what it is and not as a substitute for what only revelation can tell us, there is nothing objectionable about it. Both religion and sound philosophy convince us that the human soul could come directly only from God: there is simply nothing in animal life alone capable of producing it. But God could certainly have prepared the human body as a fit habitation for such a soul through a process of evolution. This would not in the least affect the fact that He is man’s Creator.

We have been talking all along of “man,” that is, of mankind. But Genesis speaks of the creation of *a* man, does it not? The story of Adam and Eve, in other words. Is this part of the teaching of the Bible too, that mankind begins with one man and one woman? You hear it said often nowadays that the Biblical story of Adam and Eve is a mythical picture of the origin of the human race.

Here we have to make some distinctions, I think. Undoubtedly the inspired authors of the Bible did think of mankind as having begun from a single pair of first parents; they had no reason, of course, to think anything else. Actually, this is not too clear from the first creation story, where it is simply said, “God created man in his image... Male and female he created them.” Just as “man” here refers to both sexes, it could also refer to the entire race of man – we also use the word to designate an individual male.

In the second creation story, however, and especially in the story of the Fall of man that follows it, it becomes evident that the story is being told from the standpoint of a single man and woman. The author

is not pretending, of course, that he knew their names, that is, what they called each other. “Adam” is merely the Hebrew word for “man,” and “Eve” is derived from a Hebrew root meaning “life.”

To say that the Biblical authors presupposed that mankind began from a single man and woman, however, is not the same thing as to say that the Bible teaches this. It had no obvious purpose in doing so, and it would be difficult to show that it does indeed intend to teach such a detail concerning the origin of the human race. What it does teach, however, as we shall see in a moment, is that sin and evil have been introduced into the world through man’s free will, contrary to the intention of God in creating him. Furthermore, not only in Genesis but also throughout the Bible it is taught that all mankind has been caught up in sin (see Genesis 8:21; Romans 3:9), and that one man is responsible for the fact that all men have been constituted sinners (Romans 5:12). This is the revealed doctrine of “original sin.” Theologians have always understood this to mean that sin has been transmitted from one generation to another, and that revelation therefore presupposes that all of sinful mankind is descended from that one “through whom sin entered into the world.” Whatever may have been its beginnings in creation, therefore, it would seem that the present human race at least has a common ancestor. This is the conclusion that Pope Pius XII presented to us in an encyclical letter to the Church in 1950.

III

GOD KNOWN

We have continually noted that the knowledge of God that comes through revelation is superior to what we could know only by reason. Just what could we know about God if we were left entirely to ourselves?

Once again, we have to make a distinction between what man *could* find out and what, in fact, he *has* found out, according to the testimony of history. I think you should see the reason for this distinction without too much difficulty. It is all well and good to say that, under ideal circumstances, certain facts are within the attainment of man's reason. When we say this, we merely mean that the facts are not of such a nature that they are impossible to be known by a created intellect.

The "ideal circumstances," however, presuppose a number of factors that are not always verified in practice. For one thing, they presuppose that a given person will have the time and means to give undisturbed leisure to the process of thinking out these truths. Most people, obviously, do not have this time and means. It is unfortunate, but true, that society can support only a limited number of philosophers. For another thing, the "ideal circumstances" presuppose that a person is using his reason as he ought to, not letting it get cluttered up with idle or useless thoughts, that he is really thinking and not allowing his emotions to run away with him. Again it is unfortunate that this condition is not always present. There are many wrong-headed people in this world, often well intentioned, but still wrong-headed. This will give you some idea as to why I spoke of God known by reason as the "God of the philosophers." There is a big difference between what man, as man, *can know*, and what men, as men, *actually do know*.

But if God created man with the ability to know Him, why should it be so hard for the ordinary man to do so? Surely God was able to create the mind of man so that it could know Him!

In the first place, as we deal with man now and his ability to know God, we are dealing with *fallen* man; he finds it a great deal more difficult to use his reason properly than he would have if there had been no original sin. Secondly, from the very beginning God never intended that man should live simply in the state of his nature, nor did He leave him there. Man has been and is destined by God for a supernatural end, which does not contradict reason but which goes far beyond it.

Reason and Faith

I do not intend to exaggerate the difficulties which man experiences in arriving at a natural knowledge of God and His moral will. When I speak of those difficulties it is to explain the fact that there can be such differences of opinion on the subject even among people of very good will. What may convince one person may not convince another; what may be clear to one may not be equally clear to another.

Also, it is these difficulties that explain why the natural religion of even quite brilliant men has so often been inadequate, or even misguided. But I certainly do not mean to imply that reason will take us nowhere in the knowledge of God and of His law. It can take us far, even though not far enough. It is particularly valuable, as I think we have already seen to some extent, in throwing additional light on what we have learned through revelation – in showing how it relates to all that we know through experience. And it also prepares us for revealed knowledge in a way, by pointing to gaps in our knowledge that only revelation can fill out. Its best value is seen when it works in parallel with revelation, for the two are not opposed to each other.

We have an example in the idea which many have of God as Creator. This seems to be such a universal belief among people of all times and places that it surely must be the result of human reasoning.

Incidentally, this fact, that men, however isolated from one another in time and place almost invariably seem to come up with basically the same conclusions about the fundamental facts of life and truth, is probably the best proof of all that the human race is, indeed, one, that man has a common nature that sets him apart from the rest

of creation. Science is one with revelation, of course, in agreeing that men are men whatever may be the difference in the color of their skin or in their other physical or cultural characteristics.

Yes, if we can speak of a “God of the philosophers,” with even greater accuracy must we speak of an “atheism of the philosophers.” By this I mean to say that atheism does not come naturally to man. It was simply unheard of in the ancient world. It goes without saying that I would not agree that atheism is an attitude taken by reasonable or thoughtful men, in our own day or in any other.

Knowing God Through Reason

It is far more likely to be the attitude taken by the half-educated or the self-educated, which is too often the same thing, the attitude of someone who has stumbled on a few facts which are new to him and which he therefore imagines must be new to everyone, facts which create problems that his mind cannot solve and which he therefore concludes are insoluble.

The vast majority of mankind, from the dawn of human history to the present time, in whatever part of the world they have been or can be found, has always found it more reasonable to believe in God than to try to account for themselves and the world about them without God. While they have not always drawn the best or the most consistent conclusions from this fact, still the fact itself does testify to what the experience of history has taught us is a human trait, that at least in the really important things the majority of people are more likely to be right than to be wrong.

In the political order, the development of the idea of democratic rule is based on this experience. Men may make many mistakes, and demonstrably do so, but the mind of man exists to arrive at truth, and in a matter such as this it is easier to agree that the vast majority has seen the truth than to conclude that it has been seen only by a relative few who dissent from the majority.

If there is one thing that we do instinctively and that we are also schooled to do from our earliest experience, it is to ask the “why” of things. We refuse to believe that things can just happen; we know that

for every effect there must be some cause. All science, of course, is built on this principle. The music I listen to is a pleasing arrangement of sounds put together by some intelligent mind; the books I read are composed of words that have been arranged by someone who had something he wanted to say. Nobody would ever be able to convince me that Beethoven's great choral symphony just happened by chance when a number of musicians sat down and began to play at random. Nobody would ever be able to convince you that these pages that you are reading are the result of someone's having shaken together a boxful of type just to see how the letters would come out.

There Must be a First Cause

Not only must every effect have a cause, but it must also be a cause that is *sufficient* to explain it. Our reason tells us this. It is only an elementary conclusion of human reason, therefore, when we insist that this great universe in which we live and of which we are part must also have been caused by someone.

Some have agreed that everything must have a cause. However, they have pointed out that the causes and effects of nature are "built-in," so to speak. For example, animals breathe in oxygen and breathe out carbon dioxide. The carbon dioxide, in turn, is taken in by plant life, which gives out oxygen. Thus there is a continuous cycle which explains itself. There is no need for a God to be continually creating new oxygen for us to breathe.

Yes, but who started the cycle in the first place? What is described can be reproduced by any of us on a limited scale. Anyone who has kept an aquarium of goldfish, for example, knows that either he has to keep changing the water in the tank as the fish use up the oxygen in it, or he can "build in" the oxygen supply, by putting plants in the tank. But he has to put the plants there: they do not just create themselves out of nothing because they are needed. The oxygen-carbon cycle itself is an effect, which demands a sufficient cause to explain it.

The more that science tells us about the truly marvelous machinery of nature, the more it demonstrates the necessity for an explanation of it all. We live in an age when human technology has

attained astounding proportions. We – that is to say, those of us who are experts in these things – can put together a rocket that can fly to the moon and strike a predetermined area within a time determined almost to the split second. We can push the button of a computer and in a few seconds read the answer to a mathematical question that might have kept a battery of hard-working mathematicians busy for the rest of their lifetimes.

But it would obviously be a very simple-minded person who would think that the rocket and the computer explain themselves because of their “built in” causality. Somebody had to calculate the rocket’s trajectory and when it should be fired in relation to the position of the earth and the moon at given times. The computer had to be constructed and “programmed” by expert mathematicians who are using it simply as a tool, an extension of their own minds and physical faculties. And however complicated these human inventions may be, they can never approach the complexity of a single cell of plant or animal life, the life that we see going on all about us.

No, we do not explain the universe simply by pointing out how intricately well ordered it is; rather, we make it all the harder to explain. We do not explain it simply by tracing back one effect through a series of causes; instead, we are just postponing what must be its ultimate explanation if it is to make any sense at all.

In other words, no matter how far back we go in explaining one thing by another, finally we have to come to some cause, which was not caused by anything else. That is what our mind tells us if we pursue the argument far enough. To add cause on cause, even if we had the ability to count them one by one, would simply lead us back in time through the thousands and millions of years whose number staggers our imagination. But there, at the beginning of it all, we should still be asking our question: “What started it all?” Or rather, “Who started it off?” since all of this amazing order and complexity points to an intelligence with a purpose and a design, just as the computing machine points to the intelligent beings who designed it.

This Beginning, this Uncaused Cause which alone can solve the riddle of existence, this Supreme Being and Intelligence which has

planned and designed it, we call God. This is the “God of the philosophers.” We could not, as I said before, know a great deal about Him from this way of reason alone. We can reason to His existence, to His self-sufficiency and power and intelligence. We could surmise something about His purposes in creation. But we could also surmise incorrectly, the farther we take our conclusions away from the one thing that reason tells us is absolutely certain.

If we are to know God adequately, therefore, and to know ourselves adequately in relation to God, He must enter into our world and make Himself known to us. Thus the knowledge of God that we have through revelation, of which we have already spoken, does not contradict the knowledge that we can have through reason but it certainly goes far beyond it.

But on what grounds do we accept this revealed knowledge? If it goes beyond natural knowledge, still it, too, must be reasonable, must it not?

It must be reasonable even though we do not arrive at it by reason. Since man is a reasoning being, anything that he does, including the acceptance of revelation, must be a reasonable act if he is acting according to the nature God gave him.

IV

REASON AND REVELATION

The acceptance of revelation is an act of faith. That is to say, it is an acceptance of truths not necessarily because we ourselves see or know the evidence for these truths, but because we accept the veracity of the one who makes the truths known. Our whole life is built on faith, natural faith, quite apart from any question of supernatural faith in God. When I get into an airplane to travel from one place to another, I am making an act of faith in a great number of people. I am professing my belief in the competence of the pilot, in the structure of the aircraft, in the very physical laws (which I confess, I do not understand) which permit something weighing so many tons to glide safely through the air. This is not a blind faith, of course, for I have very good reasonable grounds for all these assumptions. Nevertheless, it is faith, for I cannot check and verify the evidence for myself in each case the way I can verify that two and two are four.

Similarly, I do not know, *I believe* that there is a city called Mecca in Arabia, a place where I have never been or am ever likely to go. I believe it because I can find it listed in atlases and I can read about it from people who have been there and I can even see pictures that they say they have taken of it. I have to take the word of the people who have made the atlases and printed the pictures. Again this is a reasonable faith – it would be unreasonable not to have such faith – but it still remains faith.

Faith is Reasonable

In accepting revelation I believe on the word of God not only truths that I do not happen to know personally, but also truths that I could never find out all by myself. This faith, too, must be reasonable. That is to say, I must have reason for my belief that God, the Creator and Author of truth, has revealed Himself. I must have reason for accepting as God's revelation the Biblical teachings of which I was speaking a while ago. Simply because they are in the Bible does not

prove that they are true to anyone who does not accept the Bible as God's word.

As a Catholic, I believe that the Bible contains God's word because this is the teaching of the Church, and I accept the Church as the continuing voice in this world of Jesus Christ, God's final and complete revelation of Himself to man. I must have reasons for this faith. Other booklets speak about these reasons when we discuss the Person of Jesus and the Church that he founded.

I would emphasize that it is not only Christians who are obliged to have a reasonable faith. As I mentioned before, some kind of faith is indispensable if we are to live in this world at all. Some of our acts of faith are reasonable and some are not – which of us has not discovered at one time or another that we have trusted in the wrong thing or the wrong person, and how often have we not had to reproach ourselves for trusting foolishly?

As regards the most fundamental of all commitments that one can make, the faith by which he dedicates his life and by which he lives, it is obvious that above all he must act reasonably. It is not a question here of faith or lack of faith; rather, it is a question of which faith. The so-called unbeliever really has a faith of his own, though it is not a faith in the Christian God.

I believe that my faith in the Christian God is a reasonable one, and on the other hand I find many non-Christian faiths to be entirely unreasonable and contrary to all historical evidence. There are those, for example, who tell me that if man is just left to himself and not bothered with thoughts of God and religion, if he is given good government and enough to eat, he will bring forth a utopia on this earth in which justice and every other virtue will flourish. In the light of human history, a belief such as this truly requires the faith that moves mountains.

The Meaning of Suffering

If faith is to be reasonable it must give me a reasonable interpretation of life. Nature alone does not do this. To illustrate what I mean, I would like to quote from a book dealing with an aspect of

divine revelation. The quotation is from Robert Hugh Benson's *Christ in the Church*, in which the author takes up a problem that frequently troubles those within and without the Church, that of suffering and its meaning:

“The whole of Nature exists on the principle of vicarious suffering; and to reject Christianity because of the doctrine of the Atonement is to reject Nature itself on the same account. To turn from Christianity in high-minded repudiation of the ‘injustice’ of the dogmas of Pain as preached by her, and to seek peace and reassurance in the songs of birds and the blossoming of flowers is, almost literally, to jump from the frying pan into the fire. For the frying pan at any rate stands for an attempt to use the fire intelligently, and the fire, unused, stands for mere destruction. Christianity at any rate suggests an endeavor to face facts and to interpret them; Nature offers the same facts without any interpretation. The shrike crucifies its food alive; flowers bloom on corruption; robins kill their parents; all life comes with birth pangs, and exists only on terms of death. Man feeds on beasts; beasts on herbs; and herbs on minerals. These are facts, whether we like them or not. And Christianity at any rate encourages us to face them, and to say that minerals, by destruction, pass up into herb-life; herb-life into animal; animal into human. Christianity goes even further and completes the cycle by giving us reason to believe that man, by suffering, becomes elevated, and rises even to be ‘partaker of the Divine Nature’ from whom all proceeds. If then these facts are contrary to our idea of justice, we had better correct our ideas of justice, for they are simply untrue to life – whether of Religion or Nature.”

The Natural Law

Is this relation between reason and revelation also found in the moral law? Most people are agreed on the existence of a natural law, though they may call it by a different name and sometimes draw different conclusions from it. Natural law means nothing more or less than that man is capable of recognizing that some things are right and some things are wrong, regardless of whatever others may say about them, regardless of whatever human laws may be made about them. As such, natural law is the basis of man's conscience: his moral judgment

that he is acting rightly. It is, in fact, the basis of our laws of society. In the words of Blackstone, the great jurist who has formulated the common law of the Anglo-Saxon tradition, natural law is “binding over all the globe in all countries, and at all times,” and therefore, “no human laws are of any validity, if contrary to this.”

The natural law is the law of *man's* nature, that is, of his reason. A plant does not make decisions as to whether it will grow in this or that place or in this or that manner; it grows according to the laws of nature that have been implanted in it. An animal, too, acts according to its nature when it follows its instincts regarding food, reproduction, and the like. Only man has reason to guide him and the freedom to decide whether he will act reasonably or not. When he is acting reasonably he is following the law of his own nature, the natural law.

He knows, for example, that it is wrong to commit murder, because reason tells him that such an act violates the right of another rational being to govern his life by the same reason and free will he recognizes in himself. He knows that it is wrong to steal another's property, because reason tells him that only by a respect for one another's undisturbed possession of their goods can there be any stable society. He knows that adultery is wrong because it attacks the welfare of the family, which is the basic unit of society. Lying is wrong because it misuses the faculty assigned for human communication – which would become an impossibility unless we had the right to presume that our fellow men were telling us the truth. And so forth. Conclusions such as these are the basis of the laws by which man governs himself in every society and at all times in history.

Reason is also capable of distinguishing between these laws, to say which is more important in a given case or which takes precedence: a person may have forfeited his right to life, for example, if he is trying to deprive another of his life or is acting to the destruction of society. Reason can, by the same principle that it determines a thing to be right or wrong, also determine the degree to which it is right and wrong. Some acts are, obviously, more contrary to man's rational nature than are some others.

This recognition of what is right and reasonable, what is in accordance with man's nature, is in itself another acknowledgement of the existence of God. We admit a moral order because we see that man and the world in which he lives exist to some order and purpose. They are not, therefore, simply their own explanation, but they have been given a direction by their Creator. It is for this reason that one acts contrary to his nature when he takes his own life – for this life is not his to use in any way contrary to the purpose for which it was given him.

Most of the things mentioned that are generally recognized as wrong are forbidden by the laws of civilized society.

Human Law

Concerning the basic affirmations of man's nature about his moral life there is such general agreement among all people that they have become the laws of all peoples. Violations of these principles are designated by organized society as crimes, acts that are punishable by society as such. At least, it will determine these acts as crimes under certain circumstances. It will not take account of a "private" lie told to one individual by another, perhaps, but it will punish perjury, that is, a lie told by someone who has put himself on public record to tell the truth. Such an act is antisocial and therefore wrong.

Even if there were no human laws enacted by governments or other public authorities, even if a man were to find himself isolated in a desert or cast on a remote island apart from all others, he would still be bound by the law of his nature that is the basis of human laws. We can see this truth often exemplified, as a matter of fact, in the conduct of those who often could escape the consequence of their crimes as far as the detection of society is concerned, yet who are driven by remorse to give themselves up for punishment. This does not always happen, naturally, for remorse can be stifled just as we can act contrary to our nature in so many other ways. Nevertheless, it occurs frequently enough that we can see in it the truth that man himself is his own judge long before he has been judged by anyone else.

This is what we call “conscience,” the moral judgment that man passes on the actions that he is about to perform or that he has already performed, by which he determines whether they are right or wrong. Conscience is not some mysterious voice or instinct; it is an exercise of man’s rational nature.

The Natural Law and Revelation

In any case, this points up the fact that natural law is not enough to give man a way of life in his present condition. It is good as far it goes, but it does not go far enough. Just as we need to be told about God a great number of things we could never know for ourselves, so we need to be told by revelation a great number of things about God’s moral will. It is in the light of this revelation, too, that we can see much more clearly some commandments of the natural law which theoretically we could have found out for ourselves, but in practice never would. Since the natural law is the law of man’s nature, it can be adequately understood – only when man’s nature is adequately understood, and for this we need the light of revelation.

V

MAN, AS HE IS

The teachings of revelation on original sin are the key to many of the puzzles of human existence. If you will remember, we saw that revelation had a great deal to tell us about man's nature, part of which is readily confirmed by human experience. Man was created in God's "image and likeness," distinct from the rest of creation. He was destined by God to rule over the visible universe, to dominate and use it for the good purposes for which God had brought the world into existence. All of this is in accordance with man's nature, as we know him.

But certain things are told us, especially in the second creation story (Genesis 2), that do not accord with man as we know him. We read, for example, that "The two of them were naked, the man and his wife, yet they felt no shame" (Genesis 2:25). We do not find nakedness a condition in which men and women can habitually associate together, for quite obvious reasons. While it is quite true that the standard of modesty may differ from generation to generation and from place to place, and while we may at times find exaggerations of it as well as laxity, still all reasonable persons are agreed on the fact that modesty itself is a necessity if there is to be any civilized society at all. The sexual appetite is one of the strongest of human drives and its proper control and exercise are the duty not only of individual men and women but also of society. Civilized society has always found clothing to be a necessity in exercising this control.

The Tree of Life

We also read of some other conditions in which man lived that are not those of our experience. One of them is signified by the "tree of life" which was available to man in the garden in which God placed him (Genesis 2:9). Even if we had no further information to go on, we would doubtless surmise that by this the author meant to say that man was not subject to death, that he had natural immortality at his fingertips. We know, as a matter of fact, that the theme of a "tree of

life” or “plant of life” was fairly widespread in the popular stories of the world in which the author of Genesis lived, just as similar themes have lived in later legend – recall the “fountain of youth” that is supposed to have brought Ponce de Leon to America.

But is the inspired author teaching us that man was created immortal? Here we would seem to have something said that really contradicts our experience of man. If there is one thing we are all fairly sure of, though we do not like to think of it often, it is of our death. Man’s body is in a progressive state of deterioration, and the older we grow the more conscious we are of this. Quite literally, “we begin to die from birth.”

And of course God also says to man in this story, “Dust you are and to dust you shall return” (Genesis 3:19). But that is not the end of the story, when He is on the point of removing him from the garden. Is this story of a Garden of Eden just the author’s primitive way of locating the beginning of creation – somewhere in Mesopotamia?

No, there is more to it than this. It is symbolic, true, but its purpose was not to locate any place literally on this earth. In the first place, the “geography” of the passage is impossible even by the loose standards of antiquity; in Genesis 2:10-14, the author is not describing a place in Mesopotamia or elsewhere, even though some of the names are Mesopotamian. He is rather drawing on some symbols that were then in common use in order to signify, first of all, that the man whom God had created was from the beginning given some prerogatives over and above what was due him by nature and, second, that man forfeited these privileges by his willful sin of disobedience.

The Meaning of Marriage

Are we to understand from this that there would have been no death and suffering, and no use of our sexual faculties, had there been no original sin? Would this not put the institution of marriage into rather strange company?

Revelation does not say there would have been no marriage. Marriage as the natural condition of man is mentioned by the second creation story before the question of sin arises (Genesis 2:23-24), and it

has already been shown as blessed by God in the first creation story (Genesis 1:28). Marriage is not a consequence of sin, but the good estate which God intended both for the perpetuation of the human race and for establishing the family relationship which is a reflection of the intimacy in which He has wished to live with mankind.

So good is it, in fact, that it has been made a sacrament of the Church, and St. Paul can compare Christian marriage to the common life shared by Christ and His Church (Ephesians 5:30-32). What would not have taken place without original sin is the abuse or misuse not only of the sexual appetite but also of other desires of our nature which, though good in themselves, if allowed to go unchecked by our reason can lead to our conducting ourselves less as human beings than as animals. Drunkenness, gluttony, avarice, and so forth, are also results of giving in to what we call our concupiscence.

Disorders of this kind, as well as death and its accompanying pains and physical suffering, are what sin has introduced into the world. They also presuppose that man does not find it as easy to use his reason rightly and to exercise properly his freedom of will as would have been the case had there been no original sin. Sin, after all, is not merely the violation of some arbitrary rule that has nothing to do with man's make-up.

Sin cannot be committed without doing violence to one's own nature, withdrawing it from its proper course and sending it into byways. We know this, to our sorrow, when we ourselves commit sin. What is true of sin now was true then. Man sinned, and as a result man is different now from what he was. He remains man in all his essentials – both revelation and reason tell us this. Nevertheless, he has lost the gifts which God in His goodness had bestowed on his nature.

Precisely how man would have continued to fare had there been no original sin we cannot know in every detail. About the gift of grace, however, the gift of God's intimate friendship of which I spoke before, we have considerably more information. For this is a gift which, through God's mercy, man can and does receive again, a gift that He has made possible through the work of redemption or the reconciliation of man with God.

The Destiny of Man

This supernatural destiny itself is God not merely as the goal of man's natural existence but as He is in Himself. Just what this means fully, even now we cannot know, since it lies beyond the grasp of man's experience and understanding. "Eye has not seen or ear heard, nor has it entered into the heart of man, what things God has prepared for those who love him" (1 Corinthians 2:9).

VI

THE FRIENDSHIP OF GOD: LOST AND RESTORED

This gift of grace is that of God's friendship to which, as I said before, man as a creature has no right to aspire. It is a gift which makes us children of God (see John 1:12), which we obviously are not, merely as creatures, any more than something that I may make with my hands can be called my child. Because God can neither love what is evil nor have as His child what is alien to Him, we speak of the gift of grace as "sanctifying" grace, that is, a gift that constitutes us holy, worthy of God's friendship. The Genesis story tells us of this by describing the friendship and intimacy that existed between God and man prior to original sin – it is after this sin, as you will recall, that "the man and his wife hid themselves from the Lord God" (Genesis 3:8). The New Testament tells us a great deal more about the nature of grace, which has been restored to men – to those who are willing to receive it – through Jesus Christ.

"It was through one man that sin entered the world, and through sin death, and thus death has passed into all men, inasmuch as all have sinned.... But God's act of grace is out of proportion to Adam's wrongdoing. For if the wrongdoing of that one man brought death upon so many, its effect is vastly exceeded by the grace of God and the gift that came to so many by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ.... As the issue of one misdeed was condemnation for all men, so the issue of one just act is acquittal and life for all men. For as through the disobedience of the one man the many were sinners, so through the obedience of the one man the many will be made just" (Romans 5:12, 15, 18-19).

Original Sin

It was the loss of this grace, which cost our Lord Jesus Christ so much to restore to man, that was the greatest and most disastrous result of original sin.

What was the nature of man's original sin? The Bible says that Adam and Eve ate of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, which God had forbidden them to do. Was this just the violation of an arbitrary command?

We can doubtless be sure that it was not just the violation of an arbitrary prohibition, though this may be all that we can be sure of. We do not know what was the precise nature of man's original sin and it is fairly certain that the inspired writer of Genesis knew no more than we do. Basically, of course, it was a sin of pride and disobedience. The "tree of knowledge of good and evil" is on a par with the "tree of life," naturally. "Knowledge" for Biblical man meant pre-eminently the knowledge of experience: when the author goes on to say, "the man knew Eve his wife" (Genesis 4:1), he means sexual experience. Eating from the tree of knowledge of good and evil here indicates, therefore, having an experience of good-and-evil, that is, experiencing the moral order of good and evil by doing something within that order, which in the circumstances we know was something evil. What was it? The text does not specify.

As our first parents saw it, however, "the tree was good for food, pleasing to the eyes, and desirable for the knowledge it would give" (Genesis 3:6). That is always the way of temptation, of course. Sin appears to us so attractive here and now that we can forget what its ugly consequences may be; we prefer the good that we hold in our hand to the only good that, as we know, ultimately matters. The words of the tempter in this story are also a study in the psychology of temptation. He first distorts the divine command: "Did God say, 'You shall not eat of any tree of the garden?'" (Genesis 3:1). Then he denies its validity: "No, you shall not die; for God knows that when you eat of it you will be like God, knowing good and evil" (3:5).

The Nature of Sin

"You will be like God." In a sense, this describes what the sinner tries to do in committing any sin. Man was already created like God in the way God had intended him to be, and he had been admitted into God's friendship. But now, on his own, as master of his own destiny, he

must be like God, as he would have it, that is to say, independent of God, a god unto himself.

At any rate, the deed was done, and mankind has never been the same since. "Then the eyes of both were opened, and they realized that they were naked.... The man and his wife hid themselves from the Lord God" (3:7-8).

Now we begin to understand what is meant by the punishments which God is pictured as visiting upon man as a consequence of sin. A while ago I said, "sin cannot be committed without doing violence to one's own nature." The pain and suffering which follow in the history of mankind are not really an act of divine vengeance. Rather they are evils that man has created for himself.

I might also add that while the fact of original sin has been made known to us through revelation, and while many of its circumstances necessarily remain mysterious to us, it nevertheless corresponds to much of what history and experience teach us about man.

Man the Enigma

Man has always been a riddle to the philosophers who have studied him. He is a creature who can literally scale the most sublime heights and almost in the same instant sink to the lowest depths. He is capable of great poetry, music, and art, of scientific achievements that bespeak a mind of subtlety and depth, of selfless acts that ennoble him while he is ennobling others. He is also capable of the utmost in degradation, of acts more vile than any brute beast could perform, of complete degeneracy of soul.

Some observers of man have been given to the greatest optimism over his prospects: they have put their trust in man, only to have their trust betrayed time and time again and to see all their illusions shattered. Others have been no less wrong in adopting a completely pessimistic attitude, a despair of any good in mankind at all – which has been obviously contradicted by many facts of human history.

A great convert to the Catholic Faith, Gilbert K. Chesterton, wrote that when he first heard of the doctrine of original sin it was then

that all the apparently discordant facts that he knew about man began to click into place like the pieces of a Chinese puzzle. It is this that explains both the good and the bad in man – created good and destined for a high purpose from which he has shut himself off; self-frustrated in his better aspirations; able to go bad all the way or to work his way back to the stars.

Several questions remain. One of them, though perhaps it is not too important, is with regard to the figure of the serpent in the story of the Fall of man. Just who is he supposed to be? Surely the Biblical author does not intend to tell us that there was a time when serpents walked and talked? The serpent in this story appears to be much more clever than the man and woman he is dealing with. Yet in the story of Genesis no intelligent creatures have been spoken of other than man.

The author of Genesis certainly intended to personify the power of evil by means of the figure of the serpent: he is portrayed consistently as a highly intelligent being. Much later on, another inspired writer would put the same teaching in language with which we are more familiar: “God formed man to be imperishable; the image of his own nature he made him. But by the envy of the devil, death entered the world, and they who are in his possession experience it” (Wisdom 2:23-24). So also in the New Testament: “The man who sins is a child of the devil, for the devil has been a sinner from the first; and the Son of God appeared for the very purpose of undoing the devil’s work” (1 John 3:8).

Do Angels Exist?

The Genesis story does not dwell on the creation or the existence of angels, for it is concerned only with the visible creation of which man is a part and which has been placed under his dominion. Furthermore, the Old Testament learned of the existence of an angelic order only by degrees, as God saw fit to reveal this knowledge. Both the Old and the New Testaments, however, leave us in no doubt about the existence of angels, and we also have been given some information about what they do. The word “angel” originally means “messenger,” and it is in this way that the angels are usually represented in Scripture, as the messengers or ministers by whom God governs the universe and

sometimes deals with men. The Psalmist says to the man who trusts in God: "To his angels he has given command about you, that they guard you in all your ways" (Psalm 91:11). Such texts are the basis for our belief in guardian angels.

Despite the fact that we – and the Bible – usually depict angels in human form, we know that angels are what we call "pure spirits," that is, spirits only, without bodies, just as God is purely spiritual. In order to indicate the difference between them and man, the artist usually pictures them with wings or in some other extraordinary form, though, of course, they have no wings, just as they have no bodies. Like man, they are intelligent beings, but unlike man they are pure intelligences. They are, therefore, creatures of God a stage above that of man the creature.

We are also told that the angels, like man, have been put to the test by God and that some of them, like man, have fallen. The fallen angels are known as demons. Their leader we know as the devil (a word that means "attacker") or by the proper name Satan (meaning "adversary"); sometimes we use the same words to designate the whole order of evil. For just as God uses the angels as His agents in the world, the demons are the ministers of evil, striving to bring about the frustration of God's good plans. "Depart from me, accursed ones into the fire prepared for the devil and his angels" (Matthew 25:41).

Mankind Before Christ

I have referred several times to the work of salvation effected by Jesus Christ by which the life of grace has been restored that was lost by original sin. Where does that leave all those uncounted millions and billions of people who must have lived between the time of the Fall of man and the coming of Jesus Christ?

It leaves them where we ourselves are, within the history of salvation. For God did not abandon the man whom He had created and destined for life with Himself. Man had failed the test, but God remained faithful to the plan which He had freely chosen for Himself.

In the same breath in which God utters the punishments of mankind that are the consequence of original sin, we also hear Him say

to the serpent: “I will put enmity between you and the woman, between your seed and her seed; it shall crush your head, and you shall bruise its heel” (Genesis 3:15). What did the Biblical author mean by these enigmatic words? Certainly this: that God will not allow this to be the final round in the battle between good and evil for the possession of man’s soul.

He *puts* enmity between the serpent and the woman, just as He *put* man in the garden – He continues to intervene in the affairs of history for his own beneficent purposes. There will be continuous struggle between the human race – the “seed” of the woman – and the order of evil personified in the serpent – his “seed.” And since God takes a part in this struggle, it will not be unequal, weighted on the side of Satan and his minions.

“It shall crush your head, and you shall bruise its heel.” The progress, or the issue, of the struggle is graphically illustrated by the figure of a man crushing the head of the serpent into the dust, whose fangs are fixed in his heel. The author of Genesis did not know precisely how the battle would progress and finally end in victory; this we learn from the New Testament revelation. It was in Jesus Christ that mankind rose triumphant over sin and the devil – the part of mankind, that is, which is willing to receive the salvation which He has won for it.

How the victory was prepared for, however, through the many long centuries that were to come, is the history of salvation both of the Old and the New Testaments. It is a history which we can only summarize most briefly here. The rest of the Book of Genesis tells its initial phases. After several chapters that show how the remote ancestors of the people of Israel would, if left to themselves, have simply been lost in the sea of the nations of man, we are told how God’s providence eventually settled on a man called Abraham whom He called away from idolatry to become the ancestor of those who would eventually become His people.

Archeologists can help us to date the age of Abraham with some certainty – roughly around the eighteenth century B.C. What God may have done within the intervening centuries and millennia, the

Bible does not say: the history of Genesis does not pretend to be complete, but only a record of God's saving activity with regard to the people of Israel and its ancestors. He could, of course, have revealed Himself to others before the time of Abraham. But at least from the time of Abraham His divine plan is worked out within a single family and people.

The promise which God made to Abraham was to make a nation of his descendants, which would somehow prove to be a blessing for all mankind: "I will make a great nation of you.... In you shall the nations of the earth be blessed" (Genesis 12:23). Genesis tells the story of his immediate descendants and leaves the history at the point where one of the families descended from Abraham, the Israelites or sons of Israel, have migrated to Egypt.

In Egypt, as the rest of the Pentateuch tells us, they are formed into a people. They are oppressed, and eventually God saves them from the slavery of Egypt and leads them to Palestine, the land of promise. Meanwhile, He makes a covenant with them, that is, chooses them as His own special people and gives them His law. It might be said that the entire Old Testament, in some way or other, is the record of the subsequent history of the covenant (actually our word "testament" in this sense really means "covenant," referring to this unique relation between God and a people). Still, not even the Old Testament in its entirety can explain the full meaning of the covenant. For that we need the New Testament revelation, from which we learn that the covenant of Sinai was to serve as a preparation for the coming of Jesus Christ, the universal Savior of mankind.

Salvation Before Christ

But if salvation came only with Christ, by what means, if any, could those who lived before the time of Jesus be saved?

They were saved as we all are, or can be, saved, namely through faith. In telling of Abraham's acceptance of God's promise, Genesis says: "Abraham believed the Lord, who credited the act to him as justice" (15:6). Commenting on this, Saint Paul wrote: "These words were written not for Abraham's sake alone, but for our sake also. It will

be credited to us in the same way who have faith in the God who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, who was delivered up for our sins and raised to life for our justification” (Romans 4:23-25).

The history of salvation, you see, is a history of grace. Just as grace was not due to man from the beginning, but was God’s free gift, so has it been ever since. Abraham was not chosen by God because he had merited God’s consideration, but only as an act of God’s mercy. This mercy, this revelation of Himself that God made to him, he accepted: this is faith. Similarly, the election of Israel to be God’s Chosen People through the revelation mediated by Moses in the thirteenth century B.C., was purely the grace of God. Israel knew this: “It was not because you are the largest of all nations that the Lord set his heart on you and chose you, for you are really the smallest of all nations. It was because the Lord loved you” (Deuteronomy 7:7-8).

With God, of course, there is no time, though He deals with man in the time that is proper to him. The faith which Abraham had, the faith which any true Israelite could have, is the same faith that we possess. Times have changed, but God remains the same. His divine plan has developed as far as man is concerned, but it was always the same in His own eternal “today.” By believing in the God of revelation and salvation to the extent that they knew Him, the people of the Old Covenant had at their disposal His saving grace which would be exemplified in Jesus Christ only many years later. Thus Christ is the Savior of Abraham and Moses in the same way that He is our Savior.

And while many things have changed with the fulfillment of the divine plan in Jesus, still we should not minimize the importance of the religion of the Old Testament. There cannot be a fulfillment without an anticipation; history cannot come to a successful conclusion unless it has a beginning. Such is the condition of man’s nature, the nature to which God has graciously condescended and upon which He has built in the order of salvation. Just as we are what we are at least in part because of what our natural ancestors were, so too we are indebted to our ancestors in the Faith, of both the Old and the New Testaments.

A B O U T T H E A U T H O R

Father Bruce Vawter, C.M., was a Professor of Religious Studies at De Paul University, Chicago. His field of study and teaching was sacred Scripture. This text, written about 1969, is theologically solid and it addresses the questions still asked today.

