

# Where It All Began

## An Inductive Study of Genesis

### Concerning the Nature of Truth

Holy Scripture exhorts us to love the Lord our God with “all our heart, all our soul, all our mind” (Matt. 22:37 NKJV). We are to use our minds when we approach the things of God; we should not leave, so to speak, our ‘mind at the door’ when we read Holy Scripture. It is very proper to analyze, to question, and to debate Scripture, for such is at the very heart of Jewish tradition (it is, after all, the Hebrew Scriptures which are our “Old Testament”) – the tradition to which Jesus Himself belonged. In fact, we find Jesus (at Luke 2:41-49) supporting the activity of examining and debating the meaning of the Hebrew Scriptures, and Himself engaging in the pursuit. What is more, Jesus’ more ‘flexible’ approach to the Jewish Law, as that Law is articulated in the Hebrew Scriptures, manifests His revealing of the *Spirit* behind the *letter* of what is written. The letter (of Law, of Holy Writ) is a vehicle of the Spirit and of meaning: the New Testament narrative shows us, by our Lord’s example, that we must seek that Spirit and that meaning, and be on our guard against making the letter itself into an idol. The Christian movement began as a challenging of the ‘dead’ letter, and it is, I suggest, in approaching the Bible in the light of the Spirit and not of the dead letter that its meaning can be more and more revealed.

The earliest “Fathers of the Church” – those theologians whose thinking and writing extracted from the Bible the interpretations of Scripture which became the basic and standard beliefs of traditional Christianity – themselves maintained that Scripture is properly understood to have not one, but several *levels* of meaning and truth (St. Thomas Aquinas and St. Augustine come immediately to mind). Most, if not all, of these early theologians (with the possible exception of Origen) maintained the truth of a literal or historical level of truth to be

found in the Bible, but contended also that this is not the *only* way that truth is revealed in Holy Scripture. The truth of the literal or historical level may be asserted, they agreed, while recognizing the deeper spiritual truths articulated at the levels of symbolism, metaphor, and analogy. These theologians understood that the events narrated in the Bible – even if historically and literally true – *refer beyond themselves*, revealing truths much more profound than can be expressed in normal modes of speech.

The idea that there is symbolic, metaphorical meaning beneath the narratives, concepts and principles of the Bible is nothing new, and does not require that we deny a literal or historical truth value to Scripture. We are free to believe that the things recounted in the Bible really did happen, if that is convincing and important to us, while at the same time opening ourselves to the study of the ways in which the Biblical text expresses spiritual truths by means of recognizable and often cross-culturally universal symbols and metaphors. We are also at liberty, if we are so convinced, to find the narrative and concepts comprising the Bible to be purely a vehicle for the expression or indication of divine truths that are inexpressible on the level of everyday thought or speech. Analysis of the Biblical text in terms of its authorship, symbolic/metaphorical content, and logical cohesiveness is not a demythologization: *story* is not to be dispensed with or reduced to some other sort of ‘truth’ (such as psychological, sociological, biological or metaphysical). Rather, upon a well-balanced and responsible approach to in-depth Bible study, the Story of the Bible is to be considered *essential* to the understanding of what it means to be a human being in God’s universe – that Story, whether one regards it as historical or not,

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cannot be 'translated' into a series of mere propositions, 'facts' and statements. Sacred Story depicts the elements of Reality (God, the universe, human being) in a worldview manifesting particular relationships and emphases; it is a symbolic whole which can reveal truths which can be shown, glimpsed or experienced and which by their very nature transcend the level of data.

The truth of story, like the truth of poetry or art, is a truth which is *experienced*, more than *known*. While knowledge plays a part in the experience, there is more to experience than just knowing. Feeling or emotion plays a role in experience as well, but again, the experience of truth as it reveals itself in story or in poetry consists in far more than our emotional reaction to it. Story is able to make real for us an experience of reality which mere description cannot...

The truth expressible in story may be compared with what it can mean to know another human being. To know someone is to experience aspects of that person in a way that cannot be reduced to knowing a body of facts about him or her. This is often called the knowledge of *acquaintance*, as opposed to the mere knowledge of facts. Consider someone you know very well – your spouse, friend, brother, sister – there is something irreducible about the other person, and about your experience of knowing the other person. You could enumerate all the qualities, attributes and facts concerning that person, list all that is 'knowable' about him or her, and still that would not serve to capture what it means to experience the personality of the other person in his or her individuality. This is the truth of experience and of *relationship*. Similarly, when we approach our study of the Bible with the goal of relationship in mind, and not with the intention of gathering into our minds a collection of facts or data about God and

His creation, Scripture can become a vehicle of experience and of *acquaintance* for us. It can be a gateway to a deepening relationship with God. The kind of truth of which we speak is not the kind of truth that mere correct statements have, the kind of truth that pertains to a body of data. A human person cannot be reduced to a collection of data; so much less can God. This is the kind of truth that involves and implicates us each individually, the truth of the core of our being. It is the kind of truth that transforms. It is the kind of truth through which we become more authentically ourselves, experiencing ourselves as from God, in God, and toward God.

Vicki Frappollo

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