

GENESIS 1-3: A JEWISH CATECHISM

“Who made the world?”

Who made you?

Why?

What is sin?”

MOST OF US can still remember the drill sessions in Catechism conducted by the good Sisters who were determined to impress in our young minds the basic truths of faith. At the time, a little tired of the constant round of repetition, we might have wondered just how this question and answer business first began. Sister never mentioned a word about Adam writing down anything and it is probably a safe guess that our Baltimore Catechism didn't come to Moses along with the Ten Commandments. When did it all begin?

In a distant age another group of teachers first asked these same basic questions that the Sisters still pose. These early teachers also anxiously strove to instill the answers in their pupils' minds and hearts. The teachers of Genesis, and in particular of Genesis 1-3, accomplished their task with great vividness and vitality. But they had some very special help; they were under the direction of the Holy Spirit. What they produced presents a “history in stories” of the beginnings of man, the world and evil.

Brief as it is, this undocumented history, lacking the erudite footnotes so dear to modern historians, comes from many inspired mouths and hands. We say mouths because at first these stories were passed along orally and were not written down very early. Moses at least started the work of putting Genesis together. succeeding generations, working in the spirit of Moses, edited what had been transmitted and eventually gave us two comparatively set traditions, the Yahwistic and the Priestly.

The Yahwistic is older in point of final composition; it is the more colorful strain, having more of a folk tale mood. Its most

striking feature is the "manlike" quality given to God. The all-powerful God walks, talks, breathes, gets angry, models clay, etc. The Priestly tradition deemphasizes the "manlike" God and tends to be more theological and abstract, somewhat drier in its narration of events. It exalts God to bring out His otherworldliness, His majesty. Yet even this tradition, in order to make effective audience contact, does not completely reject the device of making God "manlike." On the other hand, the Yahwistic tradition does not simply make God the image of man. A happy and necessary balance is preserved.

Neither tradition pretends to be an eyewitness account of the momentous events it recounts. The Yahwistic, finally formulated somewhere in the ninth century B.C., and the Priestly, set during the Babylonian exile (586-537 B.C.), are given their final form by men living within a particular environment. The constant conflict with idolatry, the great crime of the Israelite nation, illustrates this fact. Again the inspired writings take much of the material for their stories from neighboring polytheistic religions but give it a monotheistic form. Each tradition roots itself in ancient times. Yet, our Genesis 1-3 in its final edition, and taken as a whole, probably stems from the hand of the Priestly editor. The younger tradition's reverence for the older tradition prevented a total re-writing so that, in the final edition, blocks or sections teaching the same doctrine but in different ways sometimes follow each other. Conflicts occur at times in small matters, but never on any important truth. But now to the text . . .

"In the beginning God created . . ."

The first chapter and a few verses of the second tell the story of Creation. The Priestly tradition teaches simply that God Who is Good created all things and created them to be good. This creation took a full week, which emphasized the sacredness of the Sabbath for the people for whom Genesis was written. Today we might call the language used "lay-theological," accurate in its way and popular.

"In the beginning . . ."—a profound statement. It gives us in three words a truth which page after page of theological literature has labored to explain. God was before anything else. Before the world existed, before time started, God IS. He created the world and began the march of time; he divided time ("there was an evening and a morning the first day"), and later gave its control to the sun, moon and stars. But note: *one* God did this *alone* and *peaceably*. Here is a belief directed against idolatry, for the poly-

theists said that the world resulted from a violent struggle among the gods.

To say plainly, "God created everything," says a good deal but only the most profound minds fully savor such a statement. It is better for the man in the street to have the message repeated six or seven times and in different ways. So God created many times the various parts of creation. He called forth day and night, sky, land and sea; fruitbearing trees and plants; sun, moon and stars; fishes and birds; domestic, wild and "small" animals; finally man and woman. The classification embraces just about everything (exactly the Priestly tradition's intention). This kind of catechism is certainly more appealing than the Baltimore's questions and answers with which Sister and students still wrestle.

God made all things but did not make them all equal. The non-living universe must serve its living inhabitants. The sun, moon, stars, land and sea provided a furnished apartment for the plants, fishes, birds, animals and men. Nor were the grades of life to equal one another. Plants served animals and they together served man and woman.

And here are the greatest creatures. Marvels abounded in God's creation but man and woman surpassed them all. God paused before creating these two. No simple "Let it be and it is" sufficed. The Creator took counsel on the project and decided to make a creature as much like Himself as possible. "Let us make man to our image, as our likeness." Man and woman imaged God, not as equals but as "likes." The likeness consisted in power to rule. Man and woman were to rule the earth and its creatures, just as God rules the universe and its adornments, including man and woman. A short poem celebrated the marvelous work:

"God created man to his image,
to the image and likeness of God he created him,
man and woman He created them."

When God finished creating the living beings, he saw to their basic needs, self-propagation and self-preservation. He blessed them and told them to multiply and fill the earth. Furthermore, God intended both men and animals to be vegetarians, pointing out what parts of the trees and plants could be eaten.

A notable contribution to the delightful state of affairs was the absence of evil. God ruled all. The Perfect Good after the days of creation looked back and saw that what He had done was good. When all was finished, "God saw that everything was very good."

His work completed, God rested like any ordinary Israelite

laborer would rest after a hard week. He stopped on the seventh day, the Sabbath. Here, the inspired author teaches another lesson. God sanctified the Sabbath, therefore it is to be observed. The writer cannot seem to pull himself away from the theme. "God ended on the seventh day the work which he had done, and on the seventh day he rested, after the work which he had done. God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it, for he had then rested after all his work of creation."

"God modeled man from clay. . . ."

Enter the Yahwist. The remainder of chapter two tells another story of creation but more imaginatively. It emphasizes the creation of man. As we have seen, Genesis 1 did not omit the creation of man and woman, but limited itself to the simple narration of facts regarding their origin. The Yahwist on the other hand gives almost all his attention to man's appearance on the face of the earth. He presupposes the rest of creation.

The earth did not yet enjoy its green finery and there was no water and no Man. God then provided them all. When he watered the earth, the growing process began. The mixture produced a clay from which God formed Man. God breathed life into him and so he lived.

God could have left Man to work out his life on earth. But Man was special. God raised him above the level of the other creatures to a status of close friendship. But to remind his "new friend" that he is still subject to Him, God imposed a command. Man could not eat of one tree in the garden, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. If he did eat the fruit of this tree, he would lose his friendship with God and all right to paradise. However, God also granted to Man the gift of immortality, freedom from physical death and suffering. Once more the author turns against idolatry, for the polytheists believed that man was little more than a plaything of the gods and hardly to be considered their friend.

God did not stop giving to Man. "It is not good for man to be alone." The Sculptor returned to His clayworks and soon brought before his chief creature a parade of animals and birds which Man named. According to Jewish thought, this naming gave Man power to rule the lesser creatures, to become like God.

But Man shortly discovered a fact God already knew. None of these creatures equaled Man or provided him a fit companion. So again God intervened. While Man slept, God removed one of his ribs and formed Woman. On waking, Man recited a poem to

express his joy. "Ah! this is bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh! This one will be named 'woman' for she has been taken from man!" After this expression of Man's love for woman, the Yahwist presents the first plea for monogamy. "This is why a man leaves his mother and his father and attaches himself to a woman, and they become one single flesh." The idyllic chapter is closed with the observation that the Man and the Woman were nude but were not ashamed. Their lower nature was completely controlled by reason.

"Behold, man is as one of us. . . ."

Both the Yahwist and Priestly author knew the bliss of Eden did not describe the unpleasant conditions of their own day. The first things from God were good. How then had evil been brought to the world? In chapter three, the Yahwist tells of its coming.

God left the garden and a snake appeared. The serpent image was a popular symbol in idolatrous religions and so became a fitting expression for the authors of Genesis to use in order to show the evil forces arranged against the friends of God.

The serpent told the Woman that if she would but eat the forbidden fruit of the tree of knowledge, she would be a God; she would know how to determine for herself what was good and evil instead of relying on God's judgment. She ate and induced her husband to eat. This simple act of disobedience destroyed the order which God had carefully placed in creation. Man and Woman rejected God's friendship. Their passions rebelled against reason and creation rebelled against the disobedient pair. Their innocence gone, they were suddenly ashamed and ran off to find clothing to hide their nakedness.

When God returned, He was terribly angry but instead of annihilating these duped creatures (as any normal polytheistic god would have done) He asked for an explanation. The Man blamed the Woman; the Woman blamed the serpent. God's mercy moved Him not to destroy His impudent creatures, but His justice meted out penalties. The serpent became the least of all the animals. From that moment on a constant battle must rage between the serpent's lineage and that of the Woman. Heavy losses will be sustained on both sides but in the end "the woman's seed" will triumph. This verse changes a chapter of despair into a chapter of hope. Victory is distant but it is coming. But God's justice was not yet satisfied. The two culprits remain to be punished. The Woman must suffer pain in childbirth. Despite this she will still yearn for her husband and her dependence on him will be more

pronounced. Because of the Man's crime the land is cursed. He must work hard to cultivate it and at most it will afford him little. His punishment is a lifetime of hard labor. Finally the gift of eternal life is taken away ("to clay you will return"). After clothing his chastened creatures, God orders them from Eden and blocks their reentry. Now man is as we know him, as we know ourselves, "prone to evil."

These few brief chapters have asked and answered a few of the basic questions which arise in our minds. But it takes the rest of the Bible to formulate completely the answer to the most disturbing of our questions; how can there be regained this lost friendship with God? The answer is fully realized when God becomes man. . . .

—John Vianney Becker, O.P.