

And in the same way the world which God made is good. But again, original sin has led to this weakness in man, to tend to prefer the creature above the creator; to be attracted by what strikes the senses more immediately—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes and the pride of life—and to seize on these created objects without due consideration for their relationship with their creator. And it is precisely this tendency which becomes ‘the world’ in the specifically Johannine sense of the word. The world is good; but only because it comes from God and leads to God; and because there is something in man which tends to ignore and distort this direction, the world is always in danger of becoming ‘world-without-God’ and ‘world-opposed-to-God’—which is the world as St John speaks of it.

It is important, then, that we understand these terms correctly, but once correctly understood we can continue to use them: they will serve as a signpost guiding us between the perils of Manicheism on the one hand, and on the other, a foolish blindness to the realities of our fallen state.

## The Meaning of Genesis: A New Commentary

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It is a pleasure to welcome the appearance in English of a work of deep theological relevance.<sup>1</sup> Dr von Rad's commentary was published in the German Protestant series, *Das Alte Testament Deutsch*, nearly a decade ago. Now that it is available in English, it is to be hoped that it will be widely read. If so, the result can only be a growth in our understanding of the developing relationship between man and his creator, who has revealed himself in scripture as the Lord of history. Let us be clear that this commentary on Genesis is not primarily aimed at the expert philologist or literary critic. Von Rad accepts the classical documentary

<sup>1</sup>*Genesis*, by Gerhard von Rad, translated by John H. Marks; SCM Press (Old Testament Library), 50s.

theory in general, and he devotes a minimum of space in this book to discussing the sources of particular passages. In this he is at the other extreme to Martin Noth in his commentary on Exodus in the same series (scheduled to appear in English also in the Old Testament Library), which is devoted very largely to source criticism. Instead, von Rad administers a corrective to any specialist in danger of losing his theological sense of direction in an unbalanced preoccupation with scientific detail. It is his consistent aim to show, by a study of the various traditions and their arrangement, the theological sense of the text of Genesis as we have it. In this he is very successful.

Von Rad's views on the formation of the first books of our Bible, expounded at length elsewhere,<sup>2</sup> are outlined in the immensely valuable Introduction to this commentary. He believes that what we know as the first six books (Genesis to Joshua, or the Hexateuch) form one connected, if not continuous, narrative. Its framework and essential theme is given in the profession of faith that was required to be made by every Israelite when offering the first fruits of his annual harvest at Yahweh's shrine. Although the influence of this *credo* is widespread throughout the Old Testament, in its primitive form it occurs only in three passages: Deut. 26. 5-9; 6. 20-24; Jos. 24. 2-13. The content of the *credo*, briefly, is this: God called the patriarchs and promised them the land of Canaan; when Israel was oppressed in Egypt, he rescued them with great signs and wonders, and led them victoriously into the land he had sworn that he would give them. It was on the basis of this simple outline of Israel's faith, von Rad believes, that the Yahwist author ('J') achieved his inspired feat of forging the immense mass of independent traditions of Israel (many of which were taken over from the Canaanites or other pagan neighbours) into a unified basic narrative, in such a way that the simple plan of the *credo* remained dominant and almost unchanged in its theological outline. The stupendous creative power underlying this fusion of heterogeneous materials may well be unsurpassed in the literature of the world. Many scholars consider that it is the work rather of a group of theologians than of a single mind. Von Rad believes that it was effected in three ways. First, the hitherto independent Sinai tradition, comprising the giving of the covenant and the giving of the law, was *inserted* into the framework of the *credo*. Here for the first time the theology of covenant is fused with the theology of deliverance, salvation and promised land. In this way was achieved the union of the two basic elements of all Biblical pro-

<sup>2</sup>Das *Formgeschichtliche Problem des Hexateuchs*, 1938.

clamation: law and gospel.

The second stage of the Yahwist's work was to *expand* the patriarchal narrative, represented in the credal framework only by a passing reference. Many traditions and groups of traditions ('tradition clusters') had been preserved independently by individual tribes. These concerned the sacred origins either of the shrines at which the tribes worshipped or of the ancestors from whom they sprang. This material the Yahwist author now weaves into a connected whole. In doing so, he is careful to leave the individual traditions and clusters undistorted while, by his arrangement of them in the narrative, he spiritually transfigures them. The patriarchal saga as a whole is woven together in terms of a single overriding theme: the promise of land and the manner in which that promise is understood and responded to by the individual patriarchs. The whole Hexateuch is organized by this author on the plan: patriarchal period and promise, conquest and fulfilment. In the Yahwist's time the book of Genesis was in no way separate from the rest of the entire work; it was merely the first part of the story, and so continuous with the second part, Exodus - Joshua. Consequently, although a simple promise of land already formed an element in the patriarchal traditions handed down from ancient times, all the stories in Genesis are now so fitted together and slanted as to show the experience and response of Israel as recipients of the promise. The reaction of faithful Israel in the finer moments of her history is reflected, for example, in the Abraham stories: in Abraham's faithful obedience in leaving home and entrusting himself to God's guidance in an unknown country (12. 1-4); in his faith in the promise in spite of strong appearances against it (15. 1-6); and in his willingness, at God's bidding, even to surrender the heir on whom the promise depended (22). On the other hand, at the very first sign of postponement of the fulfilment, when there is a famine in the land which God has only just promised him, Abraham immediately turns his back on it and goes to Egypt (12. 10). He treats God's promise as completely unreliable. And then there is the episode in ch. 16 when Abraham not merely disregards the promise, but actually attempts to force it by begetting Ishmael. By such means the true history of Israel's experience of her relationship with Yahweh was conveyed through the story of her beginnings. The lives of the fathers were presages of the future life of Israel. The story is so told by the Yahwist author as to show the hidden but inexorable working out of God's plan for Israel. When fulfilment is postponed, Israel suffers terrible temptation against faith; and when the Egyptian bondage comes, it seems to be a positive

contradiction of the promise. The Yahwist holds up to view the alternative responses that are open to Israel when confronted with Yahweh's apparent defection, responses which she has in fact made in her past history. On the one hand, she may ignore Yahweh as though he were unreliable, and she may even try to force her destiny by her own strength; on the other hand she may surrender herself to him with all the complete confidence of Abraham. But even when Israel fails, it is now seen that God still miraculously preserves his promise.

The third major innovation of the Yahwist is to *prefix* his account of primeval history, contained in Gen. 2-11, to the whole Hexateuchal narrative. What was the condition of man in relation to his creator, before Yahweh revealed himself specifically to Israel? Sin had divided men from God and brought corruption to all the world. But as the abyss widened in progressive stages throughout primeval history (the fall, Cain, the flood, Babel), so too the power of God's healing grace became stronger: 'where sin increased, grace abounded all the more'. Thus, when the first man was cast out of the garden, Yahweh not only permitted him to live on, but clothed him and covered his new-found shame. Even in cursing Cain Yahweh placed his protective mark upon him. And after the flood's destruction Yahweh established Noah in a newly guaranteed order in the world, which would never again be cursed on man's account. And yet, in the final stage of the world's primeval history, God's punishment of the builders of the tower of Babel was left unbalanced by any restorative act of grace. The nations were scattered, the unity of mankind lost. The very fact that the first twelve chapters of Genesis culminate in this great unanswered question shows that the Yahwist intended them to be an introduction to his central narrative of *sacred history*. Those earlier chapters dealt with universal issues. What follows is the story of how God chose a single individual, Abraham, and promised the eventual salvation of mankind through him (12. 1-3). Thus *primeval history* is fashioned precisely so as to pose the universal problem of sin, the chasm between God and man. Correspondingly, *sacred history* is thrown into relief as the divine response to the problem. Israel alone is to be the chosen means by which the chasm will be spanned, through her will come the 'salvation which thou hast prepared before the face of all peoples'.

Even now we have not mentioned, and have no space to do more than mention, what is perhaps the greatest achievement of all by the Yahwist. This author wrote in a period of religious stagnation, when the commercial and political ties of Solomon's new 'empire' were

proving a more powerful attraction than the religious traditions of the old tribal confederation. In the days of Israel's judges Yahweh's presence to Israel had been manifest. He had fought for her in the holy war for the conquest of the land, he had given her charismatic leaders, and her victories had been accompanied by signs and wonders. Now the signs had ceased, and Israel's attention was turned rather to the new profane interests which the open trade routes to Egypt, Phoenicia and still further afield made available. Was God still with Israel? With inspired vision the Yahwist saw that the impact of God upon Israel was not confined to the old sacred institutions, now mostly in desuetude. Had not God in fact given Israel the promised land, through the conquests of David? The old religion of the sacred institutions of the tribal confederation must be re-thought and applied to the current situation of cosmopolitan humanism. In the older traditions Yahweh had been thought of as intervening, intermittently, in the course of history. Now he is seen to be acting continuously, though invisibly, *throughout* history, even in those episodes which were apparently most profane, even in the inner working of the human heart. Several of the patriarchal stories imply that God, in his providence, is actually able to use the perverse actions of his creatures, and turn them to the accomplishment of his purpose. The occasion God takes of man's sin in his own saving activity becomes even clearer in the Joseph story: 'As for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive' (50. 20; cf. 45. 6, 8 and commentary on both passages; cf. also Rom. 9. 17). Thus God is now seen as utterly transcending particular manifestations of the sacred. No longer is Yahweh the God of Israel for her own sake alone; rather she is assigned a unique rôle in his unfolding plan for all the nations, such that through her men may be once more united together in solidarity before their creator. All the disparate tradition material which was used by the Yahwist was in his narrative transfigured and suffused in the light of a consistent divine plan incorporating and transcending them all. All the events of world history can only be seen truly in their reference to that plan, by which God guides the world according to his providence. Here, in the Yahwist's account, Israel has gained a brilliant, revealing glimpse of Yahweh's transcendence.

If this review has concentrated on the account of the Yahwist document to the eclipse of the others, it is because the reviewer's interest has been excited particularly by von Rad's handling of this author's inspired insight. Since, in common with most modern scholars, von Rad

believes that the Yahwist was responsible for the structure and the fundamental religious orientation of Genesis, and that later traditions were added in such a way as to conform more or less with his original framework, the Yahwist deserves the central place he occupies in this commentary. However, von Rad does not by any means neglect the Priestly passages and their editing of Genesis as a whole; on the contrary, he carefully brings out the doctrinal content of the priests' work. But to prolong this review any further in a new direction would be tedious. The translation of the commentary has produced some awkward and in places even obscure English, but not sufficiently so in my opinion to detract seriously from the book's worth. It seems strange that the Revised Standard Version has been used for the text instead of a fairly literal rendering of von Rad's own German translation, on which the commentary depends.

Finally, it should be said that von Rad's main thesis is altogether valid only if he is right in his conclusion that elements at least, now embodied in the book of Joshua, originally constituted the conclusion of the 'exodus-promised land' saga. Without this the ultimate goal to which von Rad makes the whole corpus of Genesis-Deuteronomy look forward is removed. Hence von Rad insists on speaking of a 'Hexateuch' rather than a 'Pentateuch'. Others deny this. For them Joshua represents not the *conclusion* of the pre-conquest saga, but the *commencement* of the post-conquest history. It may be suggested that these two positions are less mutually exclusive than appears. Joshua is *both* conclusion and commencement. Certain earlier traditions now incorporated in the book do appear to constitute the conclusion and climax of the 'exodus-promised land' saga as von Rad suggests. But later Deuteronomist editors have separated the book as it now stands from the older saga, and made it the commencement of a new history extending from the conquest to the exile, and specifically to that moment in the exile when 'Evil-merodach, king of Babylon . . . graciously freed Jehoiachin, king of Judah, from prison' (2 Kgs 25. 27).

Whatever the outcome of this controversy, von Rad's great commentary has already proved its worth. It is certainly the most profound theological commentary since Gunkel's. It demonstrates with incomparable brilliance how the theological message of Genesis deepens progressively as the traditions of which it is composed are absorbed into ever broader complexes, in the light of an ever bolder and more penetrating vision.