

A New Understanding Of Sacred Scriptures 1. The Story of Creation.

Of the books of the Old Testament surely Genesis would be one of the best known of them all. In Genesis we find some of the most familiar of all Biblical stories. Well known material but at the same time, very inadequately understood. I am thinking particularly of the very early chapters of Genesis. We have there the story of Creation, for example. Next, the description of the Garden of Eden, and of what happened there. There is the story of Noah's Ark and the Flood and of the Tower of Babel.

All very well known material. As a child you probably grew up with these stories. But the problem is, what to make of them. This is what puzzles people. Little more than a hundred years ago Christians everywhere accepted without question the literal accuracy not only of these Genesis stories, but of the stories of the Bible as a whole. It didn't occur to people to question the matter. The idea was that "the Bible was unlike all other books; a divinely guaranteed repository of knowledge about God and the world, true in all its parts and qualified, when its right meaning was ascertained, to settle any controversy." (A.R. Vidler).

But this of course didn't last. Scientific evidence began to suggest other than what the Bible stated. And critical examination of the stories themselves brought forth inconsistencies and difficulties which are by no means easily explained away. The story of creation, for instance, speaks of light before ever the sun was created. Again, a mark was set upon Cain in case people should harm him, when he was at the time the only surviving son of the first man and woman on the earth. How then can there have been other people? And the given dimensions of Noah's Ark make of it a craft totally inadequate to provide refuge for two of every living creature.

In the face of all of this there has had to be a change of attitude. By and large the Church has had to abandon its acceptance of the literal accuracy of these stories. It has come to realise that things just cannot have been so. The scientific evidence is too strong to be denied. And we have reached a stage now where it is not really known what to make of them. Biblical commentators talk in terms of 'myths' and 'legends'. The story of Creation, they say, is a Hebrew 'legend', passed down from generation to generation and finally finding its way into our Bibles. They speak of it, sometimes patronisingly, as an interesting insight into the religious convictions and simple faith of earlier people, but as something that has little direct relevance to human living today.

In regard to these stories Swedenborg stated otherwise. He pointed out that these stories have a deeper, 'spiritual meaning which in fact, in a most decided manner, touches upon the lives of people and is extremely relevant to us all. As for scientific and factual accuracy this, wrote Swedenborg, is not the important thing here. Nor does the standing of the Bible or 'Word of God' rest upon it. We are dealing here with stories which, like the parables of the New Testament, have much more in them than what appears on the surface. They are stories which have within them an inner meaning. And this is why they are included in the Word of God.

Not only is this so in regard to the stories we find in the early chapters of the Book of Genesis. It is the same with what follows: with the stories of the patriarchs, with the stories of the exodus from Egypt, of the wanderings in the wilderness, of the conquest of the promised land, and of the times of the kings.

These interiorly describe experiences such as are common to us all. For we too know what it is like to be overwhelmed by the power of evil and to be degradingly held in bondage to it. We too know what it is like to be in the wilderness alone and - just as it seemed to the children of Israel - apparently, uncared for. We too know moments of triumph, again, just as they did, when we overcome habits of selfishness and begin to realise what the promised land or - as is meant by it - the heavenly life, is all about.

But my concern for the moment is with the early chapters the Book of Genesis, and what I would like to do in a series of talks commencing tonight is to explain to you in more detail something of the deeper, spiritual meaning which the stories we find there contain.

As to what is generally meant by the story of Creation, as we have it in Genesis, Swedenborg wrote that it "treats in general of the new creation of man, or of his regeneration." (*Arcana Caelestia* 4). "The six days, or periods", he went on to say, "are so many successive states of the regeneration of man." (ibid. 6). Here then, at a deeper level, is the description of the successive stages involved in the creation of a new person within each one of us. Here is where the central importance of the story lies, and this is why we have it in our Bibles.

Do you remember what Jesus said to Nicodemus, the ruler of the Jews, who came to him by night? He said, "You must be born again." You must become an entirely new person. This is what the process we call regeneration is all about. But it doesn't happen overnight. It is a gradual thing achieved in stages. And these stages are what is described and explained in the Creation story, with which of course we are so familiar, from the Book of Genesis.

In the beginning a person's mind is "without form and void", and darkness is upon the face of the deep. Before reformation and regeneration there is nothing really living. Nothing really grows. The inner mind and nature of man is, at the outset, and before the process of spiritual re-birth gets under way, in a state of primeval chaos. Self-centredness casts a thick cloud over our minds. Spiritually we are in a state of darkness and disorder.

"Before his regeneration" we read "man is called the 'earth void and empty', and also the 'ground' wherein nothing of good and truth has been sown; 'void' denotes where there is nothing of good, and 'empty' where there is nothing of truth. Hence comes 'thick darkness', that is, stupidity, and ignorance of all things belonging to faith in the Lord, and, consequently, of all things belonging to spiritual and heavenly life." (*Arcana Caelestia* 17).

But that's not all because at the same time the Spirit of God "moves" or "broods" over us. Right from the beginning God is mercifully on hand hovering over us and seeking an opportunity to awaken us to the realities of unselfish living and the potential it holds for us. Whatever our state, and insufferably worldly and selfish though at this stage we may be, and probably are, God is watching us that there might be brought about the realisation that there ought to be change and re-direction in our living. And this realisation; this awakening; this dawning on the mind; is what is meant where it is said, "And God said, Let there be light: and there was light " "and the evening and the morning were the first day." We talk about people "seeing the light". Here it is in reference to the selfish and self-regarding way we go about life at the beginning. We see the light and make up our minds to go about things differently.

Such then is the first stage in the process which will, if we so desire it, lead to the spiritual re-birth we earlier talked about and which will, in the end, lead to the creation of a new person within us. No one can say that that awakening takes place overnight. It may come in the wake of life's disappointments, even life's sorrows. It may come to us as a result of some particularly significant experience. Perhaps after meeting someone who has a big impact on us. And-remember, there is much that must follow afterwards. This, we say again, is only a first step.

In regard to what follows, the Lord's teachings, as the next thing, takes on an entirely new aspect for us. Things we have known, but not thought all that important, such as the Ten Commandments, or the Golden Rule, take on a new significance and relevance for us and, in our thinking and in our attitudes, are separated apart. This, we would note, is what is depicted, or symbolized, in the separation of the waters which took place on the second day.

And then, our thinking and behaviour guided by such teaching, the first signs of the new, spiritual life, begin to appear.

On the third day "the earth" you may remember "brought forth grass and herb yielding seed". It is at this stage that we begin to live from the Lord and the first signs of His life operating in us begin to appear.

On the fourth day there appeared the two great lights, the sun and the moon, and what is meant or depicted is the appearance, at this stage, and within the person who is being re-born, of genuine charity and faith, or love and understanding. On the fifth day more developed forms of life are described as appearing, denoting further and fuller progress as the Lord's life becomes more evident in our own. On the sixth day we have the creation of man himself meaning the new person we can be, and we should strive to be.

Here then we have the process of regeneration brought together, from beginning to end; from the unregenerate and self-regarding person we start out being, to the completely new and different person we can become; a person who is, indeed, in the image and after the likeness of God.

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