

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](https://paypal.me/robbradshaw)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Baptist Quarterly* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bq_01.php

The Earliest Chapters of Genesis and the Modern Mind.

IF we met in any other than the Hebrew literature these stories of the making of woman, the talking serpent, the cherubim-sentry, the flame of the sword turning every way to keep the way of the tree of life, that tree of life itself and its sister-tree of the knowledge of good and evil, we should intuitively know that we were in the realm, not of the strictly historic, but of the spiritual imagination of men. It is strange that, just because we find them in this Hebrew literature, we feel constrained to regard them as literally and fixedly historic.

We forget that no race of men has ever started its literature with the severely historic, but always with either the purely or the partly imaginative; just as every child, reproducing, as the biologists assure us, in its development the history of the race, demands first a sheer story, and only later asks, "Is it true?" and, later again still, begins to press its "hows" and "whys," its scientific enquiries. So why should we expect the earliest Hebrew literature violently to contrast with and to contradict all the rest? If it did, that surely should disturb and distress us far more than aught we meet.

For it is not that the imaginative is an unfruitful literary type. Far from it. It is an acknowledged fount of further literature and art. So, understood in their true literary form, we should give a ready welcome to these earliest Hebrew pages.

Only, seeing that they are the prelude to a library of remarkable records of the acts and ways of God amongst men, we may lawfully expect that they will enshrine profounder suggestions of the mutual relations of God and man than are to be found in the earliest literary records of any other race: which is precisely what they do.

Their basic affirmation is that "The Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became living soul." Dust of the ground: no evolutionist could start lower: and breath of the divine, a duality which all our experience confirms.

Then the poet of these pages proceeds to illustrate man's living soul, first, in his passion for the vast, the limitless, the beautiful. He represents him as set by the Lord God—not in a little garden walled around—but in some very lofty mountain-range that might be conceived as the watershed of four mighty rivers, such as the Indus, the Nile, the Tigris and the Euphrates. It is obvious that the inclusion of the second forbids our finding such a region on our maps. It is ideal geography. But the truth it embodies is that the

soul of man is such that he cannot but seek the spacious and the majestic, and the lovely. So he adds that the trees in this vast garden were "*pleasant to the sight and good for food*," as though there was an appetite of the eyes before the craving of the stomach, all of which was to say that man was essentially *artist*. Further to stress this, he takes occasion to speak of gold, fine gold; of bdellium, apparently the pearl; and of the onyx or beryl: as if to say that man had such ardour for the beautiful that the ever-changing loveliness of mountain-landscape and of trees that delighted the eyes could not suffice him, but that he was destined, at the cost of infinite labour, to seek and secure it in these most enduring forms. This passion for the boundless and the beautiful was the fundamental expression of man's soul.

But he was more than Nature's admirer and lover: he was her yoke-fellow and *husbandman*; set in her garden, as no other, "to dress it and to keep it," to guard it from tempest, from trampling of wild beast and from weed; to be its custodian and friend; to find things beautiful and fruitful and to cherish them into richer beauty and bounty; to develop sloes into plums, and thin wild grasses into nutritious oats and barleys and wheats. This keenness for the guarding and the bettering of things was another indication of man's soul.

And not less his zeal for knowledge, his insatiable powers of observation, exercising itself first, as was only natural, on the close watching of beasts of the fields and birds; for on noting and studying every movement of these depended so greatly his security and food. But these were only the first to absorb his critical attention. From thence he advanced, like no other being on this planet, to observe every least thing that lay or came within his ken, till nothing was omitted nor hidden from his rivetted scrutiny. May we not fairly describe this as the spirit of *the scientist*? Moreover, to everything he found and observed he gave a name, according to its character and ways. He became the coiner of fitting, fact-registering names, the supreme linguist. Nor did man pause till he had made an appropriate name for both every objective and every imagined thing; nor till he had fashioned written as well as oral language, whereby he might pass on to sequent generations the precious store of his accumulated experience. The beginning of all this is hinted in this Hebrew poem, as a further token of man's living soul. It was, indeed, the opening process of what was to become his tireless search for fact and truth.

But there was more. All creatures God had made, even plants, were gregarious, social, sexual. But man needs and asks far more than all the rest. He cannot be content with *a* woman. His personality, his soul, is such that, when faithful to himself, he craves a wife, who shall not so much be found by him as be brought to

him, as it were in his sleep, by very God; who shall be his completing self, his real counterpart; the sweetest romance and choicest blessing of his life, for abiding fellowship with whom he will gladly leave even his father and mother and make his new home. That is to say that man has it in him to be *the supreme lover*.

Yet even so, with grandeur and beauty to admire and to revere, with exhaustless work to do for the enhancement of his heritage, with things and thoughts and imaginations of enthralling interest to study, with wife to love and children to nurture, man is so living a soul that far more than even all this is needed to secure his satisfaction and peace.

In the gardens of all other creatures on this planet there were only trees physical, material, but in man's there are twin spiritual trees, which are always central, "in the midst of his garden," the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and the tree of life; i.e. the trees of conscience and the tree of the eternal hope. He thinks he was not made to die. To the dust, from and of which his body came, it will return, but he believes that the breath of the divine within him, which is his real self, will survive and abide. He knows that nothing is of such moment as that he be faithful to the biddings of his inmost conscience; for, if soever he be disloyal to this regal monitor, the best that is in him begins to languish and to die.

So the last word concerning man is that beyond all else he is *the mystic*, and that he cannot be at peace unless the Lord God walks with him in his garden in the cool of the day. He is so unique that he can *sin* against God's bounty and love, but, if sin comes in at his door, peace flies out of his window, and he exiles himself from his God-given paradise. All this is subtly suggested in these ancient Hebrew pages, and abides profoundly unchallengeable, no matter what the final historic and scientific findings of man's earliest experience and development may be. We may justly claim that it is a not unworthy prelude to a library that men have long been persuaded contains a unique and widening disclosure of the mind and heart of God.

S. PEARCE CAREY.