

God's Presence in Creation

A sermon preached by Nick Moir at St Andrew's, Chesterton, on Sunday 23 February 2014

The majestic story of creation that opens our Bible was probably written by priestly scribes in the 5th or 6th century BC. Though written by priests, this creation story is about as secular as you could get in the ancient world. There is, of course, a creator God, but no rival gods, no other celestial beings, not even angels or spirits – simply God and the natural world. When ancients looked up at the sky they saw divine beings, heavenly bodies that ruled over the world below. Each day of the week was ruled over by one of the great lights of the sky, the sun and the moon and the five visible planets – Mars, Mercury, Jupiter, Venus and Saturn: so the first day of the week has the brightest light in the sky, the sun, then it's Moon-day, then for us Tuesday (Rosalind tells me that Tiw was the Anglo-Saxon equivalent of Mars; in French it's Mardi), then it's Woden'sday or Mecredi, Thursday or Jeudi, Freya'sday or Vendredi, and Saturn'sday apparently they didn't have an Anglo-Saxon equivalent to Saturn so they stuck with the Roman original). Although we have the seven days in Genesis, none are mentioned by name, and the first day is not credited to the Sun but to the light that comes unmediated from God – whose first act of creation is to say 'let there be light'. It's the first day of the week but it's Light-day not Sun-day. The sun isn't created until day four, but even then it isn't named. It is called rather coyly 'the greater light' – scholars believe that's because any name used for the sun would have had divine connotations. But to our writers these aren't gods; they are lights, and the greater light that rules the day is not a god but is created by God, the only god. So the greater light is relegated from day 1 to day 4 and the lesser light from day 2 to day 4. Oh and he also made the stars, our writer adds. And by that, he is including the planets, the lesser lights.

This is a disenchanted universe where the only agents of creation are the divine word and the stuff he had already made. No minor gods or spirits bring anything into being: 'let the earth bring forth vegetation', 'let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind' and it was so.

It's a very secular sort of creation story but, strangely, scholars have pointed out how the accounts of the creation of the tabernacle in the wilderness and the Solomon's temple in Jerusalem bear striking similarities. For instance, the number seven seems to structure the creation story in more ways than the number of days: v1 has seven words, v2 fourteen; the earth and the heavens are both mentioned 21 times and God is named 35 times. Moses's creation of the tabernacle uses the creating word many times; there is a similar finishing and completing of the work and a blessing at the end; and the conclusion is a sanctifying – in the tabernacle it is all the furnishings but in Genesis it is the seventh day, sanctified and hallowed as a day of rest for God, we are told, rested from his work – we'll come back to that shortly.

Solomon's temple took seven years to complete; it was dedicated during a seven day festival during which Solomon offers seven petitions. The number seven is associated with many ancient temples not just Israel's. In the book of Proverbs personified Wisdom builds a temple: 'Wisdom has built her house, she has hewn her seven pillars' [Proverbs 9.1] and this follows straight on from chapter 8 where Wisdom is pictured as God's companion at the beginning of creation.

If you were to walk up the temple mound and past the altar of sacrifice, immediately outside the holy place was the bronze sea whose practical function was for washing but which clearly also had what you might call a mythological function. Here are the waters of chaos that in Genesis 1 are there before God creates anything. Pass beyond them into the holy place and you enter a room that

would be pretty dark if it were not lit by the great lampstands that stood in front of the curtain separating off the holy of holies that was beyond – in the restored temple the lights were in the form of the menorah, the seven-branched lampstand, the lights probably representing the sun, moon and the planets. The lamps lit, you could see around you carved on the doors and walls, and woven into the hangings, trees and flowers – and cherubim. Now in our cultural history cherubim have got confused with putti, fat-faced little boys with wings. Get those out of your mind. Think sphinx, the peculiar – to us – figure that guards the way to the great pyramid. Such figures were common in the ancient near east, figures with a human face, large feet, usually of a lion or an ox and then the four-legged body of a lion or ox behind, often finished off with wings. Putting two and two together from clues in the bible and comparisons with other ANE figures, the appearance of the cherubim was that they were part ox, part lion, part eagle and, neck up, with a human face. In other words there are symbols of the greater part of the created order of animals – the birds of the air, the cattle (i.e. tame animals), wild animals – and surmounting all – Man, Adam, male and female.

Approach now the holy of holies and peer through the curtain and what would you see? Two giant cherubim – such figures often stood guard in temples, one either side – and between them the ark of the covenant, the holy chest in which were placed the tablets of the law. Above that was a cover called the mercy-seat and above the seat – nothing. For the Hebrews were prohibited from carving and worshipping divine images. Any other temple would contain an image of the god (and usually his wife), but there was no such image in the Jerusalem temple, except Adam, for the nearest thing to an image of God in creation is Adam, male and female. And Adam, male and female stands at the pinnacle of creation, royally exercising dominion over all creation and as a priest mediating the presence of God to creation. For you could stand in the holy place if you were a priest of course: and you could only peel into the holy of holies if you were the high priest.

When a king – and it usually was a king – built a temple, when all was ready and prepared there would be a grand entrance of the image of the god who would be taken into his dwelling-place in the holy of holies. He would only be taken out in times of war when the gods were required to march with their armies and lead them into battle. Israel had no image as such but they took with them the ark of the covenant. An ancient psalm of Israel, psalm 132, is a hymn accompanying the return of the ark to the temple after battle – and after the ark had been lost and found again. ‘Rise up, O Lord, and go to your resting place, you and the ark of your might.’ So the sanctuary is God’s resting-place – which brings us back, of course, to the 7th day of creation, the day on which God rested, the day upon which when the temple was first built he would have been placed in his sanctuary.

Is all this just ancient history? No – it’s ancient theology but still with some powerful messages for today, for here a pretty secularised calendar of the week, culminating in a day of rest, ties in with the specifically religious rhythms of worship. In the Jewish mindset a Sabbath of rest, refreshment, time with family, special meals and celebrations runs hand in hand with going to synagogue and doing the specifically religious bit. We Christians have kept the Jewish Sabbath and added another day, the Lord’s Day as they call it in French and Italian but which stubborn Anglo-Saxon pagans still call Sunday. We have – or we had – woven together a weekly cycle of work and rest, of routine and celebration, of secular and sacred, that has served to renew us in spirit and recharge us for the work of the week. Coming to church, or coming together as church, is about resting in the presence of

God with his people, before scattering out into the world to discover that God has gone out before us as he is still at work leading the battle against evil, injustice and all that mars his creation.