

[1958. Review of *In the Beginning, God*, by William M. Logan. *The Gordon Review* (Winter).]

In the Beginning, God, by William M. Logan. Richmond: John Knox Press, 1957. \$1.50.

Though small this is a significant book. Its thesis is that the first eleven chapters of Genesis are unhistorical. Since the author reiterates this theme a large number of times, only a few of his statements can be quoted. In the Foreword by Elton Trueblood we read, "The stories are not accounts of debatable events which happened too long ago to permit any valid process of verification, but are, instead, accounts of the nature of enduring human problems" (7). The author himself makes these statements: "The writer here was not seeking to write a textbook of history or of science . . . They are parables, not history or explanations . . . There is no attempt to formulate intellectual propositions to state basic truths . . . This is not Adam I am reading about; this is myself" (15-16).

Thus neo-orthodox theologians hope to preserve some moral and religious value for Genesis without having to defend the historical and scientific truth of these chapters. Inasmuch as neo-orthodox hermeneutics is enjoying wide-spread popularity today, it is worth while to examine its thesis with care, and Dr. Logan's book, though small, gives the argument in clearer detail than many another neo-orthodox volume.

Some preliminary clarifications should be made before the quotations above are forgotten. To say that the author (or authors) of Genesis did not intend to write a scientific or historical textbook obscures rather than clarifies the point at issue. It is not claimed that the Bible is a textbook on science or even a textbook on history. The question is not whether Genesis is a textbook; the question is whether the historical statements in the Bible are truth or not. To argue that Genesis is not historically trustworthy because it is not a textbook is a logical fallacy. If, now, the author replies, there are no historical statements in Genesis, we shall be happy to examine his reasons for saying so.

Now, this is one of the merits of Dr. Logan's book: he gives his reasons.

Even a casual reader of the book of Genesis notices a distinct, though unannounced, change of tone at the beginning of chapter twelve. With that chapter begins the story of Abraham and his descendants. From that point on the record has a more concrete sound. It moves more slowly and gives more details. It does not cover a thousand years in a single breath. It slows down to a pace with which we can keep up as it traces the life story of men and a nation. In contrast, the first eleven chapters of Genesis are epic in

their scope. Their sweep is tremendous. Incomprehensible periods of time are covered in a few words. Stupendous events are described with the brevity and matter-of-factness of a child's fairy story (13).

Now, the great Macaulay once wrote *The History of England*. It extends through five volumes of over 500 pages each. But he gets from the Romans to James I in 72 pages. Are we therefore to conclude that these pages are parables and not history? Does it follow that Diocletian and Clovis are simply symbols of myself? The statement "They are parables, not history" is a symptom of the Kierkegaardian disease. This disease is called Either-Or. Its cure is Both-And. Of course Genesis teaches important, extremely important, religious lessons. And in a very real sense, when we read about Adam, we are reading about ourselves. But we are reading about Adam too. Even the author has to admit, "The first impulse is to read it as history, for that, of course is what it sounds like"! Who then can say that these chapters were not intended to be understood as history?

If, however, the stories are not history, but merely fiction such as the plays of Aeschylus and Shakespeare (15), why should they be taken any more seriously than the works of playwrights or the Babylonian stories of creation? Again, it is to the author's credit that he does not avoid this question.

The ability to provoke this intense personal response is a mark of divine inspiration and is one of the things that sets the Biblical record apart from similar material we possess from other sources. Marked parallels are found, for example, in the Babylonian and even older Sumerian stories of creation. A reader who notes only the similarities of detail in the order and processes of creation may conclude that the Genesis account is but another version of an ancient legend common throughout the Middle East. Closer study reveals remarkable difference. The evoking of personal response is utterly lacking in the Babylonian account. The reader remains merely a reader, though perhaps intrigued by the ingenuity of an interesting fable. In the Genesis account the whole world of thought is different. Many details are similar, but the thought is completely inverted. Instead of showing how God can be made to serve the purposes of man, Genesis portrays man as utterly dependent upon and responsible to God. Moreover, instead of numerous gods and goddesses personifying various forces of nature, there stands at the very beginning *one* God who creates matter out of nothing, not just fashioning it out of pre-existent material after the manner of a human craftsman, and who exists independently of all cosmic matter" (16).

Now, this is a fine answer. Moreover I believe it is a true answer. But it is an answer that is inconsistent with the hermeneutic thesis. If the account were merely a fable, if it were not historically true, would anyone reading it for the first time have the intense personal response the author mentions? Perhaps a person who has been brought up to believe the Bible but who has later decided that it is historically inaccurate can preserve his former emotional attachment in some illogical fashion. He can argue that the stories were never intended to be historical, even though they sound like history. By rational argument, however, the rejection of Genesis' historicity can lead only to leveling the stories to those of Shakespeare and to the Babylonian story of creation. In fact, would not the Babylonian myth produce the same intense personal response, if one believed it to be true? Suppose I believed that numerous gods and goddesses actually existed, and that all the Babylonian details were true, would I not be profoundly impressed, and, if rational, adjust my conduct to these facts?

Not only does the author deny that these eleven chapters of Genesis are history; he also denies that they explain anything. He has said, "They are parables, not history or explanations . . . There is no attempt to formulate intellectual propositions to state basic truths" (15). Now, this is very hard to understand. Is not the very first verse an intellectual proposition that teaches the basic truth of creation? Then too, Gen 2:18 (It is not good that the man should be alone) and Gen. 6:5 (the wickedness of man was great in the earth and every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually), even though they have particular references, rather obviously teach basic truths about human nature.

It is, however, in the case of Adam that it becomes most serious to deny the presence of explanation in the account. The author has said, "This is not Adam I am reading about; this is myself" (16). Later on, after a paragraph on the obvious evils in the world today, the author says of the account of the fall in Genesis III:

This is not, however, the answer to the philosophical question of where evil comes from . . . This is a vivid portrayal of things as they are [today], not a theory as to how they got that way . . . Moses is not nearer to the Fall than we are because he lived three thousand years before our time. The Fall refers . . . to a dimension of human experience which is always present . . . Everyman is his own Adam . . . Man's tragic apostasy from God is not something which happened once for all a long time ago. It is true in every moment of existence (36, 47-48).

From the mention of Moses to the end, the author is quoting J. S. Whale, but with approval and as explanatory of his own meaning.

Two things should be said about this series of quotations. First, if what they say is true, if Adam is merely a picture of what happens everyday, then it follows that each of us is born perfectly righteous and succumbs to temptation only after marriage. Well, even if the wife can be symbolized away, Adam is portrayed as perfectly righteous. Everyman therefore must meet his first temptation in a condition of perfect righteousness. This view contradicts all pertinent passages in the entire Bible. "Behold I was shapen in iniquity and in sin did my mother conceive me" (Psa 5:5). "Who can bring a clean thing out of an unclean? Not one" (Job 14:4). "That which is born of the flesh is flesh" (Jn. 3:6). And for this reason these views are utterly out of accord with the standard of the classic Protestant denominations. The Westminster Confession, for example, to which every Presbyterian minister must subscribe, says, "They being the root of all mankind, the guilt of this sin was imputed, and the same death in sin and corrupted nature [was] conveyed to all their posterity, descending from them by ordinary generation" (VI, iii). Thus no one can be a genuine Presbyterian, at any rate, and hold that children are born uncorrupted or that the fall of Adam pictures what happens today.

Quite the contrary, the fall of Adam is both an historical event and an explanation of what happens today. Would it not be somewhat strange that so few children preserve their righteousness if all are born uncorrupted? Is not some explanation needed for the universality of sin? No doubt we can agree with the author that Genesis III is not "the answer to the philosophical question of where evil comes from." But this agreement does not imply that the Fall explains nothing. For one thing it explains why children are born sinners, why some die in infancy, and why all who survive commit voluntary transgressions. These are facts for which neo-orthodox hermeneutics has no explanation.

The ultimate origin of evil is a wider problem. But when a theologian surrenders the explanation of subsidiary points, it is not surprising that he has nothing worthwhile to say on the basic questions. Again referring to J. S. Whale, the author says, "Man's sinful will cannot be explained: it must remain as the one completely irrational fact in a world which God created" (46). Aside from being incompatible with the third chapter of the above representative Confession, the sentence quoted cannot be made to agree with the sovereignty of God. One of the distinguishing glories of the Reformation is that it faced honestly and answered clearly the question of evil.

There is one advantage in avoiding theological explanations and in regarding the Bible as unhistorical fiction: no longer will apparent discrepancies cause embarrassment or drive the reader to hard study for the purpose of harmonization. Indeed, it becomes possible to enjoy finding a few extra contradictions in the text. Our author, although he belittles the question about Cain's wife, makes quite a point of it. The account is inconsistent, he says, because "Cain's expressed fear that 'everyone that findeth me shall slay me' implies inhabitants of the earth who were not Cain's brethren" (49). This implication is poor logic, for Cain had brothers and sisters. Thus an invalid inference is used to produce a discrepancy where there is none. Likewise, the command that Noah should take in seven of the clean animals did not originate until much later in Hebrew history (65). But is this a fact? Can the author be sure that there was no such distinction even before Noah's day? The account, like the first pages of Macaulay's history, is very brief, and much has been omitted. Why is not the command to Noah taken as evidence of such a distinction instead of evidence of a discrepancy? The author also asserts that in the account of the flood, one statement makes it last for a year and eleven days, while another verse limits the entire time to sixty-one days (65). Unfortunately the author does not give the second reference.

Now, finally, "What event prompted the Tower of Babel story is of no consequence whatever in comparison with what it teaches" (78). But can it not with equal reason be said, What event prompted the Jesus-story is of no consequence whatever in comparison with what it teaches? If history in Genesis is unimportant, can history be important in the Gospels? If Adam is a myth, is not Christ a myth too? For Adam was the type of him that was to come; and if by one man's offence death reigned by one, much more shall those who receive grace reign in life by one, Jesus Christ, for as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by the obedience of one shall many be made righteous.

On the other hand, if "this is not Adam I am reading about; this is myself," then with equal reason this is not Christ in the Gospels, it is I. And so I am my own savior.

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