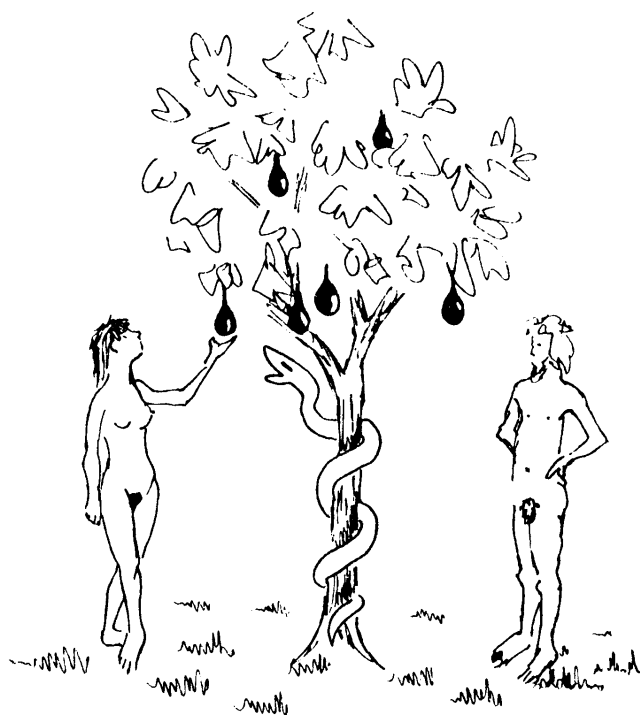


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Editorial

UNITY

It is a tragedy and an indictment of humankind that from the earliest days of the Church that there have been divisions and not unity. Luke in Acts has been described as having "papered over the cracks" but even in Acts we find reference to one of the early problems that plagued the Church namely those who believed it was necessary to keep the Laws of Moses and to be circumcised - It took Peter and James to sort the matter out.

In 1 Corinthians written as early as AD 52 it is clear that there were serious divisions - "I am of Paul, I am of Apollos" - Why are there divisions? One reason is that people naturally take the knowledge and worship of God very seriously. Paul was clearly very distressed over the divisions at Corinth but on the other hand he was not prepared to accept serious error without protest. What was the heresy? Anticipating what we are hoping to demonstrate in articles in Endeavour (Started in Issue No. 69 - "The Gnostics") it was the fantastic and evil teaching of the Gnostics. These taught that the Creator was an evil God that had created an evil world from which it was essential to escape to a higher plain. It is not surprising that Paul denounces such people who were claiming superior status and knowledge and were upsetting the church he had founded in the name of the Lord at Corinth.

Be not unequally yoked with unbelievers for what fellowship hath righteousness and iniquity? Or what communion hath light with darkness? and what concord hath Christ with Belial? (1 Cor.6:14-15).

This attitude and the circumstances are very different from that of those who, not knowing the background, take the view that this passage refers to marriage out of the faith. Paul's attitude to those who have an unbelieving partner is for them to remain together and for the Christian to show, by example, how much better is the Christian way of life.

This passage does not answer directly the question that arises when one deliberately marries an unbeliever but the principle still applies. Every case should be judged on its merits and the circumstances. Firstly - what constitutes an unbeliever? Surely not one who believes that God is manifested in three forms - The Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Although many believers and indeed many modern theologians find it difficult to believe that the Christ should exist before Jesus was born, nevertheless, does this call for refusal to celebrate the Breaking of Bread together?

What does our Lord say? "If therefore thou art offering thy gift at the Altar and there rememberest that thy brother hath aught against thee.....first be reconciled to thy brother and then come and offer thy gift".
Matt.5:23.

Though this passage does not directly address practice in the Christian Church, because there was no church then, nevertheless the principle applies.

It may be said that Jesus is only addressing personal problems but he was relating the grievance with the Altar and the Jews did not separate religion from life and we should not do so either.

At this point my eyes fall upon The Times Newspaper headline and I realise how trivial are our small differences.

SUDAN TOWN STARVES TO DEATH. The explanation:

"The Civil War in the Sudan has been running for many years and stems from rivalries between the Moslem North and the Christians of the South".

Surely this generation crucifies Christ again.

+ 1 Cor.7:12

J. H. Weaving

THE INTERVENTIONIST GOD

Most of my reflective Christian thinking has been absorbed with the question of the nature of God's involvement with my life set against the balance of chance.

I can well recall my over-inflated ego contemplating God calling me to a mission of earth-shattering importance during my adolescence. I also went through that appealing evangelistic phase of perceiving God operative in every detail of my existence, from the controlling of events and decisions of people towards the selection of a vocation which would suit His purpose (?) and my desire, to His tampering with the ignition coil of my motor thus preventing my involvement in the M6 pile up. While I do not scorn this expression of faith because of the undoubted impetus it gives to those young in the Christian faith, I do feel there ought to be a growing away from this form of placing all the onus on God's unmerited activity. We ought also to be asking the question whether this type of intervention matches everyday experience, and answering this question with honesty.

This leads me on to say what I feel is often lacking with many Christian believers today, the virtue of honesty. That is not to say that believers are prone to tell lies but there appears to be great reluctance to match their own belief system with daily experience. If we are genuinely committed to a search of God's ways, then cherished presuppositions, handed down belief packages, wishful thinking and a desire to mould God into our own image of conceptual understanding, should equally be thrown into the melting pot of honest evaluation. Not only is this a bold but necessary enterprise for our own growth, it also gives credibility to our evangelistic message to those outside the Faith.

My reading in philosophy came to my cognitive rescue at this point in helping me to draw the distinction between

what might be real and what I perceive myself to be real.

The question before us then is how do we perceive the nature of God's intervention, not only in the grand affairs of world politics, but in the petty affairs of my everyday living. Clearly, the Biblical precedent is unmistakeable. Both Testaments provide countless examples of God's absolute and thorough intervention into human history. But does our own experience and reflection bear out God to be equally as active in daily affairs in our own times?

I was recently given some illumination to this question from the reading of two books. 'Why Believe in God' - a debate between Michael Goulder and John Hick, and 'Transpersonal Psychology' by Charles T. Tart, and like few books seldom do, many long term unresolved questions began to find partial answers.

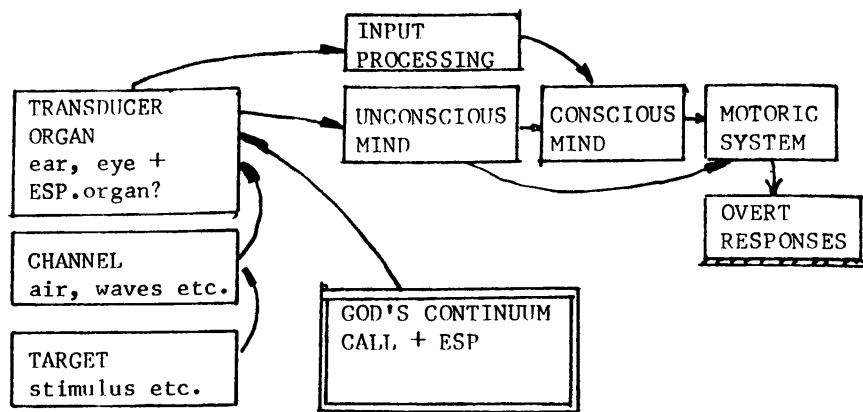
In chapter five, Michael Goulder in customary cynical wit deposes the arguments of the "for God's intervention" school with illustrations taken from the Falkland War. Are we to suppose God to monkey about with the electronics of the Exocet missiles so that some meet their target and some do not, he asks. And if so, then upon what grounds should he have spared the Invincible and not the Sheffield or Atlantic Conveyor - are those of these ships the greater sinners? When Pope John Paul I was elected (on democratic voting principles) by the Vatican, Cardinal Hume declared, Prayer is said and hearts are made open to the Holy Spirit. It became clear that this is God's choice. When alas the job kills him off in a month, 'Ah, the inscrutable will of God! How searchable are His Judgements and His Ways past tracing out!' - A Head-you-win, Tails-I-lose theology. This glib theodicy of equating disaster with God's punishment of the wicked, began to be questioned when the great earthquake of Lisbon in 1755 killed hundreds of people in a church celebrating Mass, and this marked a turning point in the philosophy of religion since it occurred during the Age of Reason.

In chapter four, John Hick writes a penetrating section on Prayer, Providence and Miracle. He abandons the notion of a God intervening in history at set periods by bursting into human affairs either by monopolising events or by influencing the human psyche, and instead he promotes the thesis that God is always transmitting some unknown type of communication to man in a continuous and consistent manner. He is anxious to resolve the consistency problem with God's intervention. The only reason why this appears not to be the case is because human beings are rarely sensitive to this call of continuum. When human beings open themselves to this initiative of God, as at certain periods of time they have done so, for example during the ministry of Jesus, then remarkable events have taken place. In this way, arguments against God's consistency and equality are ruled out and the potential and threshold of all men becoming like Christ is opened up.

In Transpersonal Psychology, Charles T. Tart, discusses the newly developing, and grossly underated, branch of science known as Parapsychology.

There is abundant evidence for paranormal phenomena of Telepathy - mind to mind communication regardless of space, Clairvoyance - awareness of events at a distance, and Psychokinesis - mind energy to affect physical movement. This evidence is collected and collated in the libraries of the Royal Society of Psychical Research, and has been laboratory tested.

A typical model of perception and motor responses may help here to illustrate how the mechanism of perception to action operates and to speculate how Extra Sensory Perception might also fit into this process.



Whatever the physics of God's communication might be, it appears likely that the Extra Sensory Perception phenomena will belong to the same category, that we as complex human beings can discover innate powers within ourselves which are products of God's Being. Acceptance that this might be so, will lead to a greater sensitivity to open oneself to His power. In Jesus, this power flowed through him and enabled him to practice these three phenomena, particularly in his healing.

The healing is brought about by the subject's own mental processes upon his physical ailment - psychokinesis. But this process cannot begin without some powerful mental force from another mind, such as Jesus, influencing his mind - telepathy.

Naturally, the mechanics of this we have not begun to understand, and some may feel we should not make any attempt to do so, but I suspect that twentieth century minds expect this of us.

In the above model, the Input processing stage is where any experience is either accepted - and made use of - or rejected, and it is the belief system which collates these varied experiences. This is why similar experiences can reinforce one person's belief in God and equally reinforce another person's denial of God.

If we accept that God may be continually sending out something to us - as He did 1959 (?) years ago to His Son, then we may begin to realise the enormous potential there is in each of us to become divine. Our part is to become open to Him and to recognise that we have within ourselves the potential to become as he was. God awakens the human potential to change the world and it involves a surrendering. Not a surrendering of the mind - this is where evangelistic emphasis of surrender mentioned earlier has gone astray. Because without the mind how are we to change the world. Through the continuum call of God fusing with our listening, reading, reflecting and learning, our cognitive awareness is shaped, and this is the directing process of our endeavours. The continuous call of God gives impetus to our emotional force which drives us onwards in the direction our mind has selected as the best course in changing the world.

We should therefore realise the immense potential within us to be called to service as Jesus was and not to undermine ourselves with the thinking that God spoke loudly in first century Palestine but whispers almost inaudibly in the twentieth century.

D. Lines.

"Why Believe in God" Michael Goulder & John Hick.
SMC. London 1983.

"Transpersonal Psychologies" Charles T. Tart.
Routledge & Kegan Paul,
London, 1975.

THE GNOSTICS -3

We are attempting in this article to summarise the teaching contained in the Gnostic book 'The Apocryphon of John' with the specific aim of identifying its particular concepts and doctrines in order that we can relate it, if appropriate, to the 'Adversaries of the Apostle Paul' and perhaps, in passing, to other gnostic sects.

To do this we need to draw out the main points described in the articles on the Gnostics in the previous issues of Endeavour.*

First the concept of God, named Barbelo, the Apocryphon states:

'The Monad is a monarchy with nothing above it. It is he who exists as God and Father of everything. The invisible one, who is above all, imperishable existing as pure light, which no eye can behold'.

He acts through a 'Pleroma' of divine beings the principle ones being Aeons, with lesser authorities Powers and Angels and Christ the Saviour. The Holy Spirit only appears incidentally - A diagram may make clearer a complex and bizarre concept. (Page 12).

* Issues 69, 70 and 71

Secondly we come to the concept of Christ. We note first of all that he is not associated with a human parent or normal birth. He is not named Jesus. His name is Christ - the divine Autogenes. (Divine - self - begotton). His begettall is described

"and he (The Father) looked within Barbelo....
and with his spark she (Ennoia) conceived
from him"

So it appears that Christ was created from a 'spark of light' by the agency of the ENNOIA and The Father, who we must presume is Barbelo. Christ, the Light, having been created - The 'Virginal Spirit' rejoices and annoints him with his goodness until he is become perfect..... The light then glories the Holy Spirit.

The Light (Christ) then requests a 'fellow worker' and is given the MIND - "and the MIND wanted to perform a deed through the 'word' of the invisible spirit..... and through the 'word' Christ the divine Antogenes created everything. The reader will realise that this has echoes of John I.

We now come to the character, who is one of the key figures in gnosticism - Sophia (Gk for Wisdom). It is difficult to assign her place in the hierarch of the aeons. She is said to be the last of the 12 aeons. This figure 12 seems only to be approximate. The same aeon crops up in different contexts. However SOPHIA is also described, as being an aeon of The EPINOIA (Gk for purpose), who is close to BARBELO himself. She (Sophia) brings forth a creature, without permission and without a consort namely YALTABOATH. As we have seen he said "I am God and there is no one else". He created Adam in the image of God (the MONAD) with the help of the powers and the angels who made a limb apiece! From Adam evil and lust came into the world because he listened to the Serpent and ate of the tree. There was further corruption of the human race when "He", presumably Yaltaboath, the chief Archon, sent angels to corrupt the

'daughters of men' and so he brought the flood. Noah and others were warned and they hid in a luminous boat not as 'Moses said in an ark'.

We thus see that Yaltaboath is identified with the God of the early chapters of Genesis. We shall not be surprised therefore that this form of Gnosticism was heresy to the orthodox Christians.

Christ is identified as the Saviour but nothing is said of his death on the cross.

The visit by Christ to the spirits in prison of 1 Pet.3:19 is taken up and enlarged. In fact 3 visits are described. The prison is identified as Hades and the middle of the prison is described as the prison of the body.

The Saviour is finally revealed as Jesus Christ in the last message of the Apocryphon. The name Jesus has hitherto been eschewed.

Finally we must consider the status of man in the eyes of the gnostic author. The fruit of the tree of knowledge brought death and the final dwelling place of those who taste it is Hades and 'the darkness' is the place of their rest'. The affliction of souls of the righteous is only the state of being in the flesh and they can look forward to the 'receivers' who will deliver them and give them eternal life and the 'rest of the aeons'. The souls of the sinners, as we have seen, are punished some temporarily and the worst eternally.

We note that nothing is said about resurrection, neither of Jesus or of the faithful.

On the question of evil, clearly an important issue in the Apocryphon, we notice first that no clear-cut Persian (Zoroastrian idealism is identified. Evil seems to originate with Sophia an aeon, and her offspring YALTABOATH. The serpent of Genesis is noted but not identified. Evil then, in bold language, appears to be due to the Yahweh (and perhaps Elohim) of the early chapters of Genesis who created a basically evil world and further corrupted it with his angels! The body

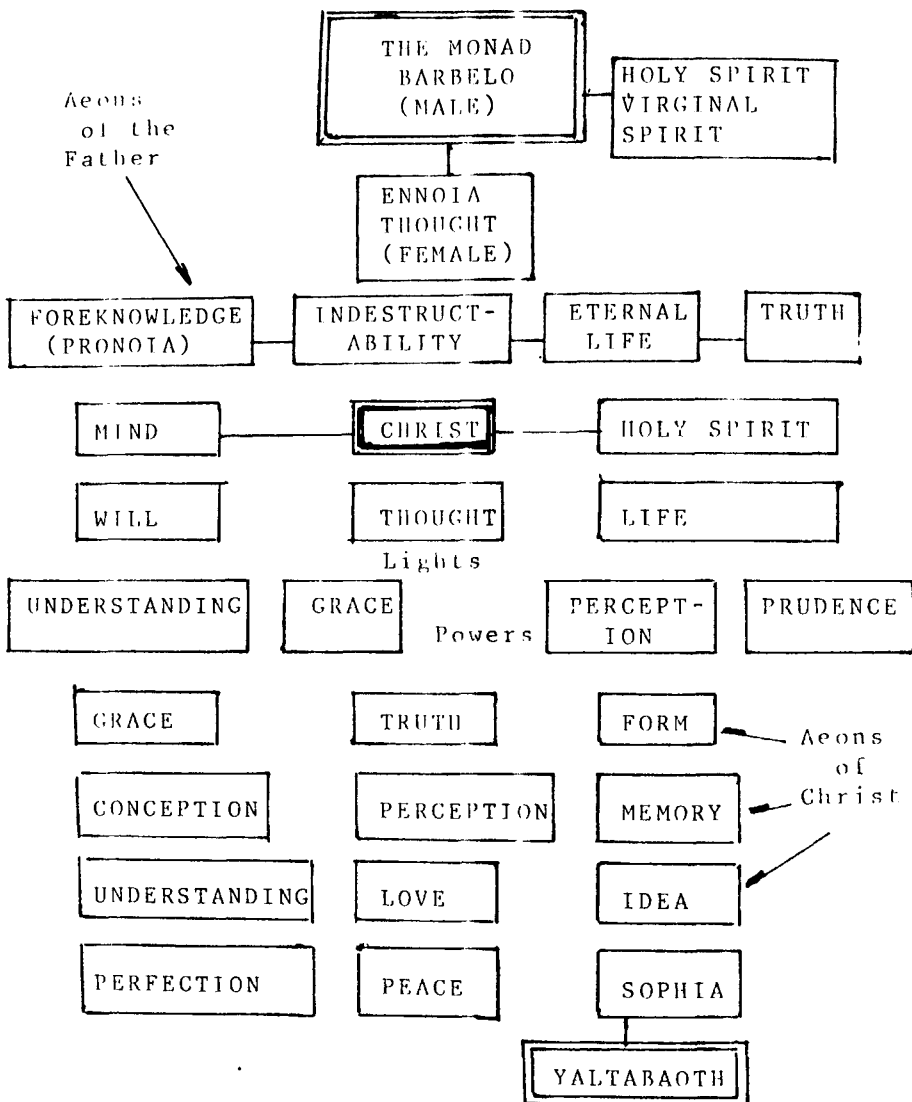
and all about it is lustful and evil. Christ, the saviour, liberates the soul from the body.

It remains for us to discuss the concept of the aeons. This is a Greek word meaning an age, a space of time, generation, particularly in the N.T. an indefinitely long time, an eternity. Used as an adjective with life - 'eternal life' it is the common description in the N.T. for the life after death and in John as a realised state in life projecting forward into the future.

It is characteristic of the Gnostics that they take N.T. words and deify them into mystic figures. All the aeons shown in the figure are translations of Greek words in the N.T. The word aeon is thus suitable for their purpose of describing beings at least equal to or usually greater than angels. They are agents of the great God who is invisible and too holy to commune directly with man.

In a further article we propose to compare the doctrine we have adduced from the Apocryphon of John with that of the Gnostic teaching found in Irenaeus' work 'Against Heresis' and finally to see if we can find antecedents of these concepts in the apparent teaching of adversaries of Paul and John in the New Testament.

J.H.Weaving.



THE DIVINE
HIERARCHY

EARLY CHAPTERS OF GENESIS

These are taken to be chapters 1-11. After this the nature of the narrative changes. The later chapters are more specifically concerned with the Jewish patriarchs while the early chapters, concerned with the origins of the physical universe, are relevant to all members of the human race.

A problem that anyone faces is that of origins. It strikes us very clearly because the physical universe, of which we are a part, is not going to last for ever. Even the rocks, which appear unchanging, are gradually worn away by water or eroded by cold. The earth, we are told, is slowing down. To say that matter has always existed does not solve the problem. What we really want to know is: "Who put us here and why?"

What does one find in these chapters? Chapter 1 and the early part of chapter 2 deal with Creation - the six days of God's labour and the seventh day of his rest.

Then follows the story of the garden of Eden : Adam and Eve were put in the garden and given certain commandments. Starting with chapter 4 we have the ancestries - ancestries which are to occupy a fair amount of these early chapters.

There is a sequence here: first Creation, then a summary account of long - lived individuals leading up to the Flood, with occasional episodes concerning particular ones, sometimes merely names and figures. The human race had become corrupt so God decided to wipe it out by the flood, preserving only one man and his family. In chapter 11 there is an account of the tower of Babel followed by further ancestry leading up to Abraham.

For whom were these accounts written? For what purpose? It is too easy to reply "for our benefit". In saying this we would have to mean "for all those who, down the course of history, might come into contact with the purpose of God and who might be interested in the purposes of God." It is clearly foolish to say that the first chapters of Genesis were written specifically for Western Europeans on an island off the west coast of Europe living in the 20th century A.D. It is necessary to consider the purpose for which it was written because the danger exists that we may twist it into a modern scientific frame of intellect that we have taken from the world around us.

These chapters were obviously written for Jews because they are written in Hebrew and lead up to Abraham, the father of the Jews. After Abraham other peoples are dealt with only in so far as they come into contact with the Jews.

A question which has been pressed vigorously is "Is this a correct record of what happened at the beginning and how events took place?". By this we tend to mean "Is this scientifically true? Can we demonstrate this in accordance with the principles of science?" When thinking about the origins of things the question is an inappropriate one. In any case, modern scientists have by no means solved the problem finally. Current ideas may in 50 years time have been discredited anyway. In addition, the ancient Israelites would not have been able to understand explanations if they had been couched in the terms of twentieth century mainly North American and European science.

The book of Genesis is anonymous. The titles of the A.V. have no authority and are not in the Hebrew manuscripts. The authorship of Moses is a Jewish tradition which we observe in the N.T. references to the Pentateuch as "Moses". Those who say we must accept this are not consistent: they do not say we must accept the literal nature of the devil, another common idea at the time of Jesus.

The list of kings of Edom in Genesis 36 is significant. The book was presumably written when the writer was acquainted with the concept of kings from his own experience in Israel. There may have been more than one compiler of the book which reached its final form during the Israelite monarchy. Ancient authors often used earlier sources and added to them without indicating what was borrowed material. Compilation can be seen as "inspired" ie. written under the influence of the Holy Spirit, just as much as "original" writing. The purpose of the book is to provide spiritual enlightenment, not scientific information.

Chapters 1-11, unlike the rest of Genesis, have their background in Mesopotamia. Chapters 1-3 contain two accounts of Creation. The first culminates in the creation of the human race generically and stresses the importance of the Sabbath, the day of rest on which God rested from His labours. The second account starts from before the end of the first and focuses on Adam and Eve. The narratives are sharply contrasted; the first is dignified and abstract while the second is more detailed and picturesque. It appears that the author of Genesis has combined two sources.

Mesopotamian background material for this time exists. Genesis was probably compiled after 1000 B.C. Even if Moses wrote it, this would not take it back earlier than circa 1300 B.C. Mesopotamian literature exists going back to 2,500 B.C. The Sumerian King list goes from the first king to about 2000 B.C. Copies exist from 1900 - 1800 B.C. The Sumerians thought that early man was barbaric. The gods gave him the arts of civilisation including kingship. The kings are interrupted by a Flood, people are saved in an ark and the kings are restored. The kings reigned for enormous periods (e.g. 46,000 years).

Other Babylonian texts give fuller accounts of a Flood. The earliest date to 1700 B.C. It claims that the human race was created without death. The gods decided to limit the ever increasing human population. After trying other ideas they decided on a flood. Some people and animals survived in a boat but after the Flood humans were made mortal. The account in the Epic of

Gilgamesh Tablet 11 mentions that the people in the boat send out three birds to see if the flood was diminishing. There is also a Babylonian tradition similar to the Enoch story.

It is possible that Abraham, coming from Ur, brought the traditions with him or that the Israelites acquired Mesopotamian traditions as they settled in the land. The author inclines to the latter view as there is some evidence for it.

God gave all men minds and the bulk of them, without the benefit of inspiration, had to use their own intelligence to produce explanations of their origins. The results, not to be despised, are myths. "Myth" covers science, philosophy and religion. Unaided man was conscious of the powers in the universe which affected him, like the sun. This aroused a sense of wonder in him. Baal, who is familiar to us, was the Storm God. Ancient man should not be blamed for making the deductions he did; without modern scientific knowledge, he was drawing reasonable conclusions from what he saw. When Genesis was written the "normal" thinking of the time was polytheistic and the pagan way of thinking affected the Israelites (viz. the lives of the kings, the references to Baal). The O.T. writers used it as background material. To summarise: the pagan view was that the natural powers were separate gods, not working together, whereas Genesis teaches that all natural powers are created and controlled by God.

There is a translation problem in Genesis 1 v 1. Verse 1 does not lead to verse 2, but is a summary of what follows. This is not usual in ancient writings. A recent Jewish translation, preferred by the writer, reads: "When God began to create the heavens.....". There is no explanation of how an unformed earth or water arose. Support for the alternative translation comes in chapter 2 v 1; "finished" implies a beginning and end to the process. The earth at the beginning is "unformed". The process of creation is one of organising and adding to.

A then contemporary pagan view was that in the beginning there existed only water. It is a common assumption, even today, that everything goes back to one element. Earth as the original element is also a Babylonian and Sumerian idea. The Egyptian idea is that earth came out of water. Only in Genesis is one God in control of everything.

The creation of light first is unique to Genesis. The writer's view is that spiritual as well as literal light is implied. Enlightenment is given to Man, who is, unlike the animals, in the image of God and the climax of Creation.

Genesis offers no explanation of the mechanism of Creation. The pagan accounts sometimes have intermediaries being used. Unlike Genesis we are not told that God commanded and it just happened. However, Genesis does not always speak in this way either. In chapter 1 v 20:24 the created world was responsible for further acts of creation. There are, therefore, possibilities of intermediate stages; not everything was "instant".

On the Second Day, there is the division of water. The problem here is the meaning of the word "firmament". In Hebrew it means "a beaten-out thing", a kind of plate holding the upper water up. In ancient Babylonian tradition a skin is stretched out for the same purpose.

Psalms 74 v 12-17 contains a similar idea. There are allusions to widespread ideas which were common in the area from the Aegean to the Indus valley. Hittite and Babylonian traditions have heaven and earth as originally one lump of matter which was divided. Reference to killing of a monster is found elsewhere. Leviathan, a snake in Canaanite mythology, is used as a symbol of evil in Isaiah. Bible writers used elements of mythological tradition when appropriate for their purpose but by no means incorporated it wholesale. There is an emphasis on the calendar ("....shall serve as signs.....") in Genesis and the Psalms. This fits in with the importance of the sun (days) and the moon (months) in the Ancient World.

In Genesis man is told to control the world and exploit it for his own benefit. This concept, like "in the image of God", is unique to Genesis. The latter cannot mean that the physical shape of man is referred to, since some animals are similar. It must be in a non-literal sense. Only man has the capacity to respond to God in a spiritual sense. That is why man was put in charge. This is the point of the first account of Creation. Chapters 2, 3 and 4 are concerned with a different purpose.

Things have gone badly wrong. Man is over-exploiting creation. The writer is offering an explanation of the origin of evil in the world and how sin could arise. Man was created in a state of innocence and bliss. The breaking of the commandment gave him new insight. He is now aware of the existence of evil as well as good. Moral good and moral evil cannot exist in isolation from each other.

Were people concerned about whether all the elements in this story were literally true? One or two things point to this not being the case. "Adam" in Hebrew means "human race", or "Man". If it were translated thus, the narrative would look very different. We all pass through the experience of learning of the existence of right and wrong through disobedience to a commandment. It is also described by the Apostle Paul in Romans (chapter 7, especially verse 9).

Chapters 4-11 deal with ancestries. The sons of Adam, Cain and Abel, represent farmers and nomads respectively. The three sons of Lamech have a function in civilisation. This is very different from Mesopotamian traditions. They said that early man was barbarous and that the arts of civilisation were revealed by the gods. While the broad outline of Genesis - creation, ancestry, flood - corresponds to pagan accounts, the details are substantially different.

Archaeology about these times is inconclusive and one has to rely on written evidence. The Hebrew language was distinct from other languages within the Semitic group. There is linguistic evidence that people with Hebrew names began to live in southern Mesopotamia around 2,000 B.C.

They were called Amorites. They migrated and overthrew Ur. One of them was Hammurabi, king of Babylon. The ancestors of the Israelites were probably part of this group. They had ancestries, were nomads, and sometimes had names found in the book of Genesis, though these often refer to tribes rather than to individuals.

Genesis implies that only Seth's descendants survived the Flood. The problem then arises as to the information given in chapter 4 about Lamech's sons. In chapter 5 there is the line through Seth which shows striking similarities to the line through Cain. People have wondered whether they are alternative early traditions about the ancestors of the Patriarchs.

The spiritual point to the Flood story is seen clearly in the Covenant made by God afterwards. There is further allusion to man being made in the image of God and responsible for ruling over the earth. This distinguishes Genesis sharply from parallel contemporary traditions.

To press for a decision on the historical accuracy of these chapters is inappropriate. Knowledge of the past is sketchy and is constantly revised in the light of new discoveries. Faith in God should not be based on the shaky foundations of modern knowledge of science and history. We should remember that the early traditions were used by inspired writers to teach fundamental truths about God.

Wilfred Lambert.

NEW JOURNAL

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May 1984.

Since we live in a multi-racial society it is inevitable many contemporary religious influences appear alien to Christian doctrine and practice. Furthermore, new cults have sprung up in recent years which may exert an unhealthy effect on the idealistic young.

'Religion Today' is a new journal - albeit only eight pages long - produced in popular format, which attempts to keep pace with developments in the changing religious scene. Although its editorial committee is mainly composed of academics its style is digestible and not overburdened with jargon.

The editor of 'Religion Today' is Peter Clarke of the Centre for New Religious Movements, King's College, London, and the first issue has articles on (i) the Rastafarian movement, (ii) 'self-religions' in Britain - of which there appear to be a rather worrying number ranging from the well known Church of Scientology to the unknown Laughing Man Institute, (iii) the House Church Movement (iv) the questionable value of the philosophy of religion.

In issue number two - October 1984 - the reader will find an article on Religion and Law, and Progressive Judaism and Religious Belief.

Annual subscription is £3, including postage, and the journal, which appears in January, May, and October, is obtainable from Ethnographica Publishers, 19 Westbourne Road, London, N7 8AN.

Paul Pearson

The Editor,
ENDEAVOUR MAGAZINE.

LETTERS

Though my wife and I left the Christadelphians some eight years ago, I have of late taken an interest in several articles in your magazine - particularly as they are moving toward a line of thought with which I have some sympathy yet some reservations.

I have long held the view that the Stone struck Daniel's Image some 2,000 years ago¹, this being just the start of a train of thought that leads to useful conclusions.

Bible Prophecy exegesis involves a fascinating paradox. On the one hand we feel driven, rightly, to find the solution to the puzzle of what it all means - especially concerning our future - while on the other hand we can never be sure of its meaning because it is by no means firm "history written in advance"².

The New Testament experience should teach us to be interested but careful! The Jewish theologians had managed to discover from the prophets that Messiah would come from Bethlehem, yet they were providentially deceived by the simple expedient of having Mary and Joseph move house to Nazareth. If there were other holy and humble people in Israel who had it all sorted out we are not told of them, and it seems that no one, but no one, understood the kind of person Messiah would be. He was recognised only by those who had their eyes divinely opened. This despite the fact that sects like the Qumran Community had well understood and lived the principles of holiness and atoning sacrifice that were embodied in Jesus.

So, can we expect to do any better these days?

When the end of this age comes we will either be blown away in a nuclear holocaust or totally surprised by what God has in store for this earth. God's future is beyond our mental and spiritual grasp - but we TRY to catch a glimpse now. What is the moral of this contradiction? It is surely this, that while prophecy may be a valuable devotional study, it is not a useful subject for public proclamation - because we will too often be wrong! Let's face it, the followers of Judge Rutherford, Herbert Armstrong, John Thomas or anyone else, suffer embarrassment because so many of their predictions, based on Bible Prophecy, have simply not come to pass. You don't need examples here! Perhaps the major thrust of their "second coming" teaching will be on target, but we have good precedent to doubt it. What follows that is totally beyond our comprehension.

Your Endeavour writers have squarely faced two problems, but have not solved them. They point up the peculiar fact that the first century Christians obviously expected Jesus to come back promptly³, yet 2,000 years have passed without him apparently doing so⁴. Secondly, while Jesus showed that his kingdom was benevolent, non-violent⁵ and already amongst them, the usual interpretations of Ezekiel 38 plus the reality of the world we live in seem to require a political kingdom born out of bloodshed and violence. Incidentally, although your writers show their dislike of the thought of a future political kingdom ruled over by Jesus and his saints, I don't feel they have made a sound case against it. For one thing Jesus would be the only man ever to have qualified as an incorruptible political despot; for another, there are other means of physical warfare than digging trenches and using bazookas!

However, I believe that there is a key to all this which ties the threads together and denies neither aspect of the kingdom. But I refrain from offering it here, no matter how convinced I feel about it, for two reasons:-

1. The interpretation which I believe makes so much clear, borrows from strands of mainstream theology such that if your readers were to accept it they would be out of step, if not out of fellowship, with their brethren, and
2. It would open up a debate (and I could easily be wrong), which would side-track the purpose of this letter. You see, I believe there is a reason why these matters are obscure and always a step beyond our understanding - regardless of how many mysteries we solve. In fact, the Bible is like this on most matters, defying our attempts to dogmatise or once-for-all write a Creed or Statement of Faith. Herein lies the lesson to be learnt, and the motivation for this letter. To explain:-

The call of God to his creation is to seek HIM. (Psalm 14:2 Cf Rom 1:19-20) But churches without exception (?) seem determined to sell themselves. They try to create a demand for their brand of religion, often using the same methods as producers of consumer goods. This denomination offers SOLIDARITY, another GOOD VINTAGE, several have THE TRUTH, while others offer a wholesome LIFE-STYLE or even the only genuine charismatic infallible LEADER. Anything but help with a personal search for a relationship with the invisible Creator of heaven and earth! If you should chance to belong to any of these sects and then take an original step in your own discovery of God, you will need the wisdom of Solomon to avoid open confrontation with a creed or tradition.

Fundamentalists offer the infallible word-by-word inspired BIBLE. (A protestant alternative to the Pope?) Yet a search for God, soon makes it clear that all is not as claimed. God DID NOT provide a book with clear answers to all questions⁶. In fact, by its own admission, much of it is deliberately made hard to understand, and its treasure came through, and has been preserved by, "earthen vessels". If the Bible were more than this we might be tempted to neglect the search for invisible reality and instead make an idol of a visible, temporary book. Give it some thought - I think Bibliolatry is fairly rife in hyper-fundamentalist groups. If they don't worship the Book, they adore its Interpreters. Paul is wiser when he insists that we should "fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal". (2 Cor 4:18)

In my youth I could never make sense of Hebrews 11. Here was a list of people extolled as being full of FAITH and pleasing to God. Yet even a casual acquaintance with their lives revealed people who never seemed to find what they were seeking, and who suffered sin, despair, death and despondency. I wanted something more concrete than that! What then was right about these people and wrong with me? Just this - they sought and trusted God despite all. I had missed the clear point of it all. The beloved faithful, believed that God exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him, . . . obeyed and went, even though they did not know where they were going . . . did not receive the things promised . . . and persevered because they "saw" him who is invisible . . . yet none of them received what had been promised.

I, wrongly, wanted a faith based on total understanding.

Perhaps I have overstated the case to make it. I willingly agree that we have tremendous advantages in having the Bible in hand. Nor do I make a plea for ignorance. But let's not forget why we have the Bible - and Prophecy. It is not so as to have temporary knowledge, precognition or comfort - it is to help us find a day-by-day trust in an unseen scarcely-understood God.

That is why it has been providentially made impossible to ever find all the answers. I need as much help in discovering how to live the life of faith as I do in unravelling the theology of Scripture. Perhaps our use of time - and the pages of Endeavour - should be better proportioned?

With others, at about the time we left the Christadelphians, we had at least two practical questions - firstly, how should we improve individual and collective prayer, and secondly, in what manner can we expect God's Holy Spirit to operate in these days? We have since discovered a veritable mine-field of true and false teaching and practice by people of all kinds and persuasions. Sadly, we found an almost total lack of elders who had previously taken a similar track and could therefore understand and encourage us.

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Footnotes:

1. Endeavour #69 Letter to the Editor, page 26.
2. Endeavour #69 Ron Coleman, page 7-8. "we can see that....what were apparently unconditional prophecies were not regarded as absolute predictions." "a prophecy may be conditional even though no conditions are stated when it is given." page 12. "prophecy is not 'history written in advance', nor can it be."
3. Endeavour #71 J. Maycock, page 14. "One is conscious through most of the New Testament of this expectation that the fulfilment will come, that Jesus will return, that the whole thing will be finished....here they are experiencing....the end time."
4. Endeavour #69 Ron Coleman, page 6. "We are asked to believe that from one verse to the next....the prophecy jumps forward some 2,000 years to a Russian invasion."
5. Ibid p.3, "It is difficult to understand how the consummation of the ages will be brought about by Jesus subjugating the nations..."
Endeavour #71 Editorial, and Ron Coleman page 23. "the idea of Christ & his saints waging physical warfare on the nations is preposterous."
6. Endeavour #72 Ron Coleman page 6.