

GENESIS 1-3: REFLECTIONS DURING THE SEASONS OF ADVENT AND CHRISTMAS

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THE FOLLOWING MEDITATION on Genesis originated last December as a series of blogposts on *First Thoughts*,⁵⁰ a blog on the website of the journal *First Things*. With the issue of same sex marriage coming to prominence in our national life, I wanted to think about why God saw the duality of male and female as good, and how this was connected with the blessing of procreation, when God blessed them and said, “Be fruitful and multiply.” I began by wondering why the Hebrew text does not say God saw the heavens as good on the second day of creation, and considering the parallel with the striking moment in the next chapter when the LORD God looks at his human creation and says “it is not good” (Gen. 2:18).

I only intended to make one post about this, but I kept coming back to the topic, for the sheer artistry of the text kept drawing me in. So I lost myself in Genesis for about a month, and soon lost track of all issues of relevance to our national debate, which came to seem increasingly irrelevant compared to the beauty of what I was learning from the text. That's how it goes with the Bible, I find. It is not there to give you easy answers to today's questions, but to lead you deeper into the counsels of God, so that you come to see everything differently and start losing interest in what you used to think were the important questions of the day. Like every good book, the Bible has its own agenda, and you learn its wisdom by submitting to its agenda.

And submitting to its agenda changes you. It's not like you get something out of the book. It's more like the book has its way with you, and you are not the same afterwards. And then, of course, you are also in a position to give better answers to the questions of the day. May it always be so with us who read this best of books.

⁵⁰ http://www.firstthings.com/blogs/firstthoughts/tag/genesis/page_3

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I. WHEN CREATION IS NOT GOOD, 12-5-13

There is a striking omission from the Hebrew text of Genesis 1, on the second day of creation. It is the day when God creates Heaven, and the omission is that he does not see it as good. Every other day of creation has God seeing that his work is good, but

not this one. The omission is so striking that the ancient Greek translation, the Septuagint, supplies what is missing in verse 8: “And God saw that it was good.”

But suppose the omission is deliberate, a piece of artistry rather than an oversight. What is it telling us? Perhaps we can learn from another striking moment in Genesis, which takes place in the next chapter, when instead of seeing his creation as good the LORD God looks at Adam and says, “It is not good that the man should be alone” (2:18). After all the times he saw his creation as good in Genesis 1, here what he sees is something that is not good. It’s jarring to hear, but it resonates with the omission in the first chapter.

When God sees his work as good, Everett Fox suggests in the notes to his translation, *The Five Books of Moses*, it is “reminiscent of ancient Near Eastern descriptions of a craftsman being pleased with his work.” Aristotle uses the word “good” in a similar way, when he associates it with the final cause, the end of a process of coming into being, including the craftsman’s work of making or building something. The craftsman says, “It’s good!” when the work is completed. “All done!” we say in a resonant English phrase, corresponding to the underlying notion of the Latin term *perfectus*, which means to be thoroughly done or made, *per-factus*. Hence in the original sense of the term, the perfect is the completed. That is why an unfinished work of music is an *opus imperfectum*—not because it is flawed or blemished but because it is incomplete.

God does not see the work of the second day of creation as good because he knows it is an *opus imperfectum*, an unfinished work. You might think that heaven is such a great and wondrous thing that it must be good in and of itself, but God does not see it that way. Heaven is not the perfection of God himself but a created thing, and it is not yet done being created when it is alone. The creation Genesis has to tell us of is heaven and earth together. The one without the other is incomplete, imperfect, unfinished—not *all done*, and therefore not yet good.

And so it is with the man, Adam. You might think that man is such a great and wondrous thing that he is good in and by himself, but God does not see it that way. As heaven without earth is an unfinished work—not yet good—the man without his wife is not yet a completed creation. The craftsman is not satisfied until he sees the two together making one whole. We do not have humanity perfected until the two become one flesh.

So it is a profound teaching when Jesus instructs us to think about the law of marriage by reading what is said of the Creator in Genesis 1, that in the beginning “he made them male and female” (Matt. 19:4). That duality—the two who become one flesh—is the making of humanity, as necessary to the perfection of God’s craftsmanship as the joining of earth to heaven. To see male and female, man and woman, as if they did not belong together by nature is to miss the goodness of creation, which makes it what it is. What God has joined let no man put asunder.

II. MALE AND FEMALE, 12-6-13

It's striking—or it should be—that Genesis does not mention “male and female” until it comes to the human creation (1:27). Before that there's seed bearing fruit and the blessing of procreation, “be fruitful and multiply,” which establishes the sexual reproduction of the beasts of the field and the birds of the air. In that sense it's obvious that male and female are present before the creation of Adam. So why is it first mentioned then?

Once again, as in yesterday's post, I'm thinking this is artistry, not oversight. There's a sense in which humanity is more truly, more fully male and female than the beasts of the field. Also more problematically male and female—as it turns out in Genesis 3, when things go awry between Adam and his wife.

And once again, comparison of the two creation stories reinforces the striking point. In the second chapter of Genesis, we read of God and man together searching for a suitable helper for Adam, as if neither had noticed that all the beasts of the field already had sexual partners, suitable for procreation. And as if the human male and female, here called “man and woman” (*ish* and *ishshah*, Gen. 2:23), were not brought together for the sake of sexual reproduction, but for the sake of mutual help and companionship. The woman is not described as a mother—being named Eve, because she is the mother of all living—until after death has decisively entered human consciousness (Gen. 3:20).

It seems clear enough: the new thing that the human being brings to creation is not sex but marriage. This implies that “male and female” mean something different, richer, among human beings than among the beasts of the field and the birds of the air. Indeed, Genesis seems to be suggesting, they are revealed in their full meaning only in the human creation, in man and woman.

This is a weighty matter if, as I was suggesting yesterday, male and female are needed together for the perfection of creation, just as heaven is not complete without the earth. Creation is not whole until the two become one. This looks more inevitable—we could say “natural”—in the unity of heaven and earth than in the union of man and woman, where human will and love are required in obedience to the word of the creator.

So matters get more weighty still. The human creation too is governed by a kind of natural law, but it is one that can be violated. The two become one flesh, but not the same way as the beasts of the field. It does not happen without the word of God and, alas, the disobedience of man. And that will affect even the relation of heaven and earth. It will begin a drama of sin and redemption, from which will emerge also the drama of human politics. Not long after the dissension between the man and his wife will come the dissension between Abel and Cain. At stake is nothing less than the goodness of God's creation. As it is today.

III. THE BIBLICAL LOGIC OF OTHERNESS, 12-9-13

In previous posts I have been thinking about striking moments early in Genesis that have to do with male and female—familiar moments with little-noticed features that are striking once you see them. Here is another one: the commandment not to eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil is addressed to Adam before his wife has been created (Gen. 2:18). First the word of God comes to the man, and then God says, “It is not good for the man to be alone” (Gen. 2:19). So why is the man alone the first time God speaks to a human being?

I take this as a clue for understanding another striking moment, which I was concerned with in the previous post: when we first hear of “male and female” in Genesis, it is in connection with the creation of humanity. Why is it that the obvious sexual differentiation among the beasts seems to be passed over? It’s as if “male and female” has not arrived at its full meaning until we come to “the man and his wife” (which is the phrase repeatedly used to designate the first two human beings in Genesis, rather than “Adam and Eve”).

Male and female is the second great duality in creation, after heaven and earth. In each case, the wholeness and perfection of creation requires both elements in the duality—first one then the other, for the good of both. For the one is not good without the other. This is what I want to call the biblical logic of otherness. It is an asymmetrical logic, where the one is not equivalent or interchangeable with the other. The one comes first, then the other. It is asymmetrical, yet it is also reciprocal: the one is for the good of the other, but the same one is not good without the other.

So in the first great duality, heaven is the source of blessings for the earth. Good gifts come from above: rain and sun, and hence seedtime and harvest, without which there would be no life on earth. The energy that makes the plants to grow and thus gives the animals their food descends from the sun. You don’t need modern theories about chlorophyll to see this: every farmer knows it who watches his crops growing while the sun rises higher in the sky each day in the spring. The light of heaven is literally life-giving. Yet God does not see heaven as good without the earth (the striking omission on the second day of creation, which I was concerned with in my first post).

This logic of otherness—first one then the other, the one for the good of the other, the one that is not good without the other—is found again in the duality of sex, male and female, the two who become one flesh, through which the blessing of procreation is fulfilled: “be fruitful and multiply.” Through this blessing God gives his creatures power to bring new beings into being. For only God is the Creator, calling into being those things which are not (Rom. 4:17), yet by the power of his blessing we can be pro-creators, those who carry forth the work of creation by bringing into being new beings like ourselves, in our own image, as Genesis says of Adam’s son (Gen. 5:3). But for that we must have the logic of otherness: male and female, the one and the other who are good for one another.

The logic of otherness only becomes really clear in *human* sexuality. I take it that is why Genesis does not speak of “male and female” until God creates human beings. It is with the human male and female that the one meets the other *as other*,

not simply fulfilling the generic purpose of procreation “after their kind,” as Genesis puts it. It is in humanity that sexual difference gives us one who confronts the other face to face, the one speaking and the other hearing, both together made in the image of God who speaks and hears.

So God speaks and man hears. But it is not good until the man has a helper fit for him, an other like him who can hear him speak. She will have to hear the word of God from him rather than directly from God. And this is good: for without this speaking and hearing the blessing of male and female is not complete. Human beings can not only speak; they can hear the word of God. And they can not only hear the word of God but speak it to one another. In this speaking and hearing the human creation is perfected, brought to completion as the image of God.

And then comes a third, the serpent, to test how well the man has spoken and the woman has heard. The serpent asks her what God has said, because she has heard it only from her husband. The serpent is probing: how well have the two of them together kept the word of God—and how well will they keep it? At issue is the goodness of creation: whether male and female, the one and the other, shall really be good for one another in their union.

It turns out the story of how creation is perfected in goodness will be delayed, for it has in fact just begun.

IV. THE ANIMAL WITH LOGOS, 12-10-13

In Genesis the goodness of creation requires what I have called a logic of otherness, in which dualities that could become divisions or antagonisms are united for the good. The basic structure of this logic is: (1) first *one*, then the *other*, (2) the one for the good of the other, and (3) the one is not good without the other. It is a logic which, as we shall see, moves us in the course of the biblical narrative from creation to history, from first things to human politics. We need this logic to understand the duality of heaven and earth, as well as male and female. And later we will need it to understand the third great duality of the biblical narrative: Israel and the nations or, in New Testament terms, Jew and Gentile.

The logic of otherness does not fully emerge until there are creatures who speak to one another. So God does not see the creation as “very good” until it includes humanity, the people who can hear his word and even speak it to one another. Over other creatures he can speak the word of blessing, “Be fruitful and multiply,” but to the human creation he first says “you” (in the plural, Gen. 1:29).

It is characteristic of the logic of otherness that this “you” first appears at the receiving end of a gift: “I have given you. . . food” (Gen. 1:29). The food brought forth from the earth is a gift from heaven, as every farmer knows who watches the sky for sun and rain. But it is a gift that becomes explicit only when God says he is giving it, speaking to the creatures he made in his image and likeness. And only in addressing them does he also speak of giving food to beasts and birds and everything that creeps on the earth (Gen. 1:30). Indeed, in the Hebrew he doesn't even repeat the