

From Angels to High Christology
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I am doing my best not to take us too far back into history, but this morning's readings are begging me to do so, especially Genesis.

Back, back, back some more to somewhere around 30,000 years ago. Pictures were being painted on the inside walls of caves. For how long? Hard to say.

Somewhere before that, perhaps the single-most important occurrence in the development from paleohumans to their progenitors was the transition from hoots and gestures and grunts of lower primates to the transfer of information from one individual to another, such as cave walls.¹

Twenty thousand years later, around the biblical time of creation, give or take a millennium, evidence of "counting tokens" has been found in the Neolithic Fertile Crescent, the Mesopotamia Valley – between the Tigris and the Euphrates Rivers. It was here, around 8,000 years ago that the world's first town Jericho appeared in the Levant (Near East) and was surrounded by a stone wall, a population of 2000-3000 people, and a massive stone tower.² It was the time of the Neolithic or New Stone Age.

It was somewhere between the 10th and 5th centuries that anonymous editors comprised the Book of Genesis, "of Birth," and its cycles of Patriarchal stories.

It is the primeval history,
Adam and Eve
Cain and Abel
Cain: Enoch, Irad, Mehujael, Methusael, Lamech, and Seth.
Adam's generations: Enoch (who walked with God and was no more for God took him), Methuselah, and Noah.

The antediluvian patriarchs are notable for their extreme longevity, with Methuselah living 969 years.

The list ends with the birth of Noah's sons, from whom all humanity is descended.³ Those sons are? Japheth, Ham, and Shem.

In the seventy generations of Noah's descendents, Abram, later Abraham, is a descendent of the line of Shem, held to be the founder of the Semitic peoples. Religious Jews and Arabs consider themselves sons of Shem.

¹ <http://www.historian.net/hxwrite.htm>

² <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Neolithic>

³ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Genesis>

The call of Abraham takes place somewhere around 2000 BCE to 1700 BCE, but no one is sure. The son of Terah, Abraham's brothers were Nahor and Haran. Nahor is the father of Abraham's nephew, Lot. The story begins in the City of Ur, where Abraham resides.

The continuing stories in Genesis that are related to Abraham: his call; his travel to Egypt to avoid famine, where he deceives the pharaoh into believing the Sarah is his sister (to protect his own life); his rescue of Lot from the King of Shinar; his taking of Hagar as his wife to produce a child since Sarah was barren (Hagar gives birth the Ishmael); Sarah who later bears Isaac and the ensuing struggle between the two; the three strangers who encounter Abraham on their way to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah and Abraham's plea to spare his family – Lot, whose wife disobeys the command not to turn to see the destruction and turns to a pillar of salt...

It is fascinating reading and wonderful story-telling that stands up against the best of novels.

But, it is not history. There is no evidence or indication in any of The Book of Genesis that these narratives were written down. As nomadic tribes, as we learned before, all of this was oral history generated over thousands of years. In fact, the first evidence of "writing" so to speak is in reference to Moses.

I spent yesterday with my family at a wedding near Danbury. After the church – and before the reception – we had some time, so we found a pizzeria and had a pie: my parents and my Aunt Ruthie and Uncle Tony. The stories about this and that started, and as I have listened over the years, I'm not sure if some of the stories had changed or if I just had not remembered them correctly. They more or less had the same big idea, but the details were, at times, different and sparse, filled in with what "probably" happened.

The "Call of Abraham" of this mornings reading – is probably not much different, except that it had hundreds of years to be told and retold and then written and rewritten. As the Interpreter's Bible states in its narrative and opinion of this particular passage:

"Now this migration of the nomad clans from the desert to the sown land had been historically the result of various forces such as pressure by other desert groups and the need for abundant pasturage. It certainly was not undertaken, at least consciously, in response to a specific divine command however mediated.

To say this is not to deny that it was in accordance with God's unfolding purpose and contributed to its fulfillment. Rather, it may reasonably be maintained that the movement at this time into Palestine, the crossroads of the ancient world, of a people whose religion was already characterized by a drive toward monotheism, was a necessary step toward the redemption of [human]kind through Christ, and so was divinely planned.

But it does not follow from the recognition of this fact *post eventum* that the Israelite clans, as they made this move, had any conception of its cosmic significance. To all outward appearances it was just another of the many migrations of peoples which occurred in the ancient world, and was so regarded by the Israelites, in the unlikely event that they gave the matter any thought whatever.

But the settlement of the clans in Palestine resulted in an extraordinary deepening and enrichment of Yahwism, the religion they had brought with them from the desert. The more sensitive minds among them, reflecting on this at a later date, reasoned that the movement which had made this possible must have been divinely willed and this story of Abraham's coming to Palestine is but one of the many passages in the O.T. in which this conviction has found expression. It has moreover been told with extraordinary skill."⁴

Think for a moment what a different world this was. Think of relying only on the narrative and the collective memory of your and seventy preceding generations. Think of no books, not because they ignited at 451 degrees Fahrenheit, but because they never existed.

Then, discover that you could write things down!

Wouldn't you look at where you are and then begin to write through that lens, seeing meaning and purpose in the things that unfolded that would not have been visible to those during the "real time," so to speak? Wouldn't the writing probably take on the importance of a new found science that changed your life as you practiced and explored it?

These narratives are incredible stories of peoples' lives and how they saw and new God in their lives. Remember our discussion about the Book of Daniel last week? Remember how the first part, the first six chapters were narratives written with a pedagogical intention? It was to provide the stories of and the instructions for the Chasidim, the devout ones. A map of how to behave based on stories – of how you behaved. This was between the 6th and 2nd Century BCE, hundreds of years after Genesis was thought to be written – guidelines for life, direction for living, a path to God to follow. Finally!

Abraham's call was framed in the way that said "live by faith, not by your sight." Follow God, wherever God leads you. And, if something goes wrong – it is because you didn't follow God's instructions – the pedagogy – as well as you should have. But, even if you mess up, God will forgive you and in God's forgiveness there will be redemption and eternal life. Everything in between are details, more or less accurate, but the idea and the promise is sound.

This was about the resurrection from the desert of a people into a mighty nation, determined by their actions of faith. New birth, from above. And John, in this morning's

⁴ Interpreter's Bible, Genesis. Page 571 ff.

gospel, continues this trajectory, surely seeing all these events, all history and before history, through the lens of Jesus Christ – in the year of about 125 CE.

The Promised Land has become the Anointed One. In John's transcendence and mystical approach, the cosmos are now directly involved in what has and is taking place on earth. The "kingdom of God" is Earth, and we are now involved in living according to God's direction so that this kingdom and we can reach our promise. And it all will happen in adherence to Jesus Christ as Lord – the New Desert Savior – YHWH.

This is the high Christology of John, and it brings to us the narrative of Nicodemus, which appears only in John's Gospel, woven into the narrative to make the point. We need to be born again in the life of Jesus the Christ. Once we were baptized by Water and Spirit (a reference to John the Baptist) now we were baptized in the Spirit (John and water no longer needed).

Nicodemus was a Pharisee and a member of the Sanhedrin, one of the twenty-three judges mandated by Jewish law to be created in every city. He appears three times in John's gospel, first when he visits Jesus to listen to his teachings, later when he states the law concerning the arrest of Jesus during the Feast of the Tabernacles (John 7:45-52), and the last time following the Crucifixion, when he assists Joseph of Arimathea in preparing Jesus' body for burial.⁵

John invites us into the narrative of Jesus with this elevated and education judge, with Jesus clearly the "professor" and Nicodemus the befuddled student. The roles are reversed – just as Jesus reversed the world with his Resurrection.

The purpose of the story, placed here, is that John wants to make clear that the only way into the kingdom of God, which from this point on is referred to as "eternal life" – is through Jesus the Christ. Once this point is made, that we must be born again, renewed in the life of Jesus to reach eternal life – Nicodemus fades from the story, for the most part. John then move on to his "pondering over the mystery of grace by which law and judgment have been superseded by gospel and forgiveness."

It's the place that John takes us to that has me most interested this morning: The power of the gospel to supersede law and judgment, through the mystery of grace, the gospel, and forgiveness.

In any attempt to change our life, it is easy to think of such catharsis as a new birth, a psychic change that produces a new way of living. In every time, including this one, I imagine many have felt what I have known: a desperate yearning for a clean slate; to start over again; to get it right.

In every time, even before the ones for any oral or recoded history, creatures like us have looked to the heavens, for who could turn away from the awe of its beauty and its foreboding.

⁵ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nicodemus>

In every time, we try to make sense of it all, and as with the judgment of prophets – only endorsed after their prophecy has held up; when we look back upon history we see it as an incline (maybe a decline) moving us ever closer to where it is we are supposed to be.

If it is true that John's high Christological message included that the kingdom of God was here (at hand, near – as Jesus said), then the task of reaching eternal life was to be present, attentive, and practicing here what Jesus called us to do; gave his life – had it taken from him: in doing.

If we follow this development of God on earth, then, I think, we have to see from beyond John, taking his gospel as an advanced interpretation of the universe and all that has preceded it – at that point, and then take it from the lens or focus of today.

For no more than they Hebrews were held in contempt by nature or happenings as the punishment (or rewards) of the sometimes beneficent sometimes ravishing, changing, moods of an unsteady God; no more than that can we hold the course of humankind, here, in the kingdom of God, as finished with the words of John. John was not Jesus, any more than John the Baptist was. In fact, none of the writing are of Jesus, as far as we know, he wrote only once – in the sand – and then wiped it away.

It has not been given to any one nation, religion, denomination, or race to be God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit's final word – for it is the Kingdom of God – of God.

The trajectory that tells the mind and those that follow the mind that we build on the past and go higher, further, more than we ever have before – are chasing the tower of *Migdal Bavel*, the ancient tower of Babylon.

Go higher, if you like, faster, further – more in depth into the science, as well; explore, design, synthesize the arts – do it all, if you like. Feed your curiosity, travel to far flung places, meet others – do all this and more: but just remember, I tell myself, "The kingdom of God is here. Eternal life is here– the Eternal God is here.

We are not missing things because we are in the wrong place, I think.

Being born again opens our eyes and our hearts to here and each other. The angels are with us. Loved ones who have gone before are with us. The Scriptures and other Holy Books of Pedagogy and Hope are with us – and God is with us, calling us to now, this place, not to make-it over as it was in the Neolithic or first century ages – but in love for today, knowing that we are still being divinely inspired in our work, and not to expect everyone to understand – but to keep going and keep loving all our brothers and sisters. For there is more to come...but first, now.

Amen.