

An
Allegorical Reading
of
Genesis 1:1 – 11:26

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Preface

This essay is not intended to be a scholarly critique of the Catholic Church's theology. In fact, it is far from scholarly. It is simply the musings of an old man who wants to put in his two cents worth in the ongoing struggles of the Church, both internal and external, in its relationship to a world that does not embrace it. While the author's training was mostly in Catholic theology, the themes explored here would be equally applicable in all religions that accept the Book of Genesis as inspired Sacred Scripture, i.e. the Jewish traditions, along with all of Christianity in general.

Christianity has brought us so much truth and goodness in its treasure trove of Scripture and Tradition. It's a shame that so much of what these sources are meant to teach us is lost or rejected as being untenable because it is so unbelievable when viewed and interpreted from a strictly historical viewpoint. More's the shame that Christianity hasn't seen these as lessons to be learned from an allegory, but rather accepts them as supposed historical truth.

I shall leave it to others to do the documentation because, if it were left to me, this essay would never have been written.

Introduction

When I was a little boy, I learned about the crawdad in the cookie jar. My mother told me all about it.

There was this little boy who simply loved cookies. But he had a problem. His mother told him that he must never snatch cookies from the cookie jar. But the little boy paid no heed. Every once in a while, he helped himself to a cookie from the jar. To do so, he had to put a footstool in place and reach as high as he could to get into the cookie jar. His mother decided to teach him a lesson. One day, she took the cookies out of the jar, and replaced them with a live crawdad. Sure enough, before too long, the lad came to snatch a cookie and reached into the cookie jar, where his finger was immediately seized by the crawdad's vicious pincers. The boy ran, screaming and crying, to his mother, who pried the pincers open with a butter knife and released their still bawling prey.

"So, you disobeyed your mom and tried to snatch a cookie?" the mother demanded.

"Yes, Mom," came the blubbering reply, "and I'm never, **never**, never going to do it again!"

And, he never did.

Later in life, of course, I came to the realization that this story was concocted, and not something that had ever happened in real life. Along with that realization there came another: that it was OK. Mom hadn't lied to me. It was never her intention to deceive me. She wanted to teach me a lesson, and the lesson was that a good boy doesn't snatch cookies. It was an early lesson in morality. She used a story to teach an important truth, that parents are to be obeyed and honored, as the fourth commandment demands.

My mother was not the only one to tell such stories to teach a lesson. Jesus taught nearly all of his lessons through parables. Aesop was a master at these allegories, commonly called fables. They conveyed truth, in that they taught important lessons. We would be moronic fools to think that the events as described in the fables and parables actually occurred in real life; many of them aren't even possible. It would be equally foolish to flippantly cast aside the underlying messages.

I believe that if the Catholic Church is ever going to regain credibility in this highly educated world, she will have to re-assess every interpretation she ever made of the stories, events, admonitions and exhortations in the Sacred Scriptures (especially the first chapters of Genesis), and distinguish the allegory from the truth that the allegory

was meant to teach. In other words, we need to acknowledge the various literary forms in the Bible and, in its reading, discern between the medium and the message.

The fundamentalist bible-thumpers of our day utterly fail to do this when they accept Genesis 1:1-11:26 as absolute historical fact, insisting that it happened exactly as written. The universe, they maintain, was created by God in six twenty-four hour days. Man was originally in some sort of supernatural state that was subsequently lost by wilful disobedience. There was in fact a flood that covered the entire world. And so on. That, of course, appeals to simple and uneducated minds because it provides absolute answers to all questions and excludes all doubt, leaving the believer in a very comfortable and smug position of being convinced that he has all the answers to life's questions.

Never mind that this approach proposes insoluble difficulties and contradictions to intelligent, truth-seeking minds. The fundamentalists of today solve these problems very simply, and, in fact, simplistically. Faith, we are told, must supply what reason cannot understand. In other words, we are obliged to believe what seems incredible to us, simply because God said that it is true, despite all evidence to the contrary. However, according to such an interpretation, God doesn't always tell the truth. For example: was man created after all the rest of creation, or before? (Be sure to read Genesis 1 AND 2 before you answer that!) If you accept a fundamentalistic approach to Scripture, God has to be telling an untruth, either in chapter 1 or chapter 2. Both sequences cannot be true because they are mutually contradictory!

In their literal understanding of Genesis, they pit themselves against any and all theories of evolution, maintaining that if God says (in the work He inspired, commonly called the "Word of God") that He created the universe in six days, then that's simply the way it is. There's no room for dissent from this because God has spoken in His Word, which trumps all other discussion. If this presents any problems to our feeble human minds, then we have to override our reason with faith, without respect to the Bible's internal contradictions and violations of simple logic.

The only way the problems posed by the fundamentalists can be resolved is by acknowledging that much of the Sacred Scriptures is allegorical in nature, building upon and interspersed with a skeleton of the Hebrew people's historical past, and, in later times, that of Christians.

After all, we can know nothing about God and our relationship with him *except* by allegory because Divinity is infinitely above the realm of human experience. No one has ever seen God, declares St. John the Apostle (1 Jn 4:12). St. Paul adds that "Now we see Him indistinctly, as in a mirror." (1Cor 13:12.) That's another way of saying that we know Him only by way of allegory. Genesis 1-11 provides a series of allegories that

teach about God and His relationship to us, as had been discerned by the Jews through countless centuries, and by other nations as well.

If all people of faith — Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, American Indians, etc. — focused on the truth behind the allegory instead of the allegorical story itself, we could more effectively work toward the unity for which Jesus so fervently prayed. In fact, *unless* the allegorical dimension is acknowledged, unity of faith in the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church is literally and absolutely impossible.

The problems posed by a literal and historical interpretation of Genesis 1-11 will be discussed in the following headings:

The Stories Themselves

The Sabbath

The Creation Story

Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden

Cain and Abel

Noah and the Flood

The Tower of Babel

Ramifications of an Allegorical Interpretation

There was and is no “Original Sin”

Hence, no need for a Redeemer

Who, then, was Jesus, and what did He do?

Sanctifying Grace: a Myth

All human beings are conceived immaculate

What about Infallibility?

The Genesis Stories

The Sabbath

Ask any Christian today, “What is the origin of the Sabbath Observance?” and most would probably say that it came to us from the Scriptures, in that God rested on the seventh day, after he had spent the prior six days creating the marvelous world in which we live.

If we hold that Gen. 1:1-11:26 is history in the modern understanding of the word, the text would certainly say that. However, such an interpretation brings up a number of conundrums that defy explanation. For example, the source of all light on earth, namely, the sun, moon and stars, were not created until three days after the creation of light itself. Another example: in Gen. 1:24-26, man was created after all the animals, while in Gen. 2:18-19, the creation of the brute animals took place after the creation of man. What is one to believe, if both accounts are interpreted as a divinely inspired historical account? To believe one is to deny the other, and vice versa. Either way, we are believing a falsehood, in one statement or the other, because *both* cannot be true!

The only reasonable way to solve this dilemma is to note that the Genesis account is not history, but allegory, which, in this case, has also been described as a distinct literary form known as “Protohistory.” If we read it as such, we can learn the truths that the authors were trying to impart, and needn’t worry about any incongruities. After all, there were no eyewitnesses to the creation story because all the world had been created before man ever appeared on the scene. The Hebrew authors’ focus was on *the way things were* in his world, not on how they had come into existence. According to rules of Scriptural interpretation, miracles are not to be assumed where natural explanations are possible.

The only reasonable interpretation of this part of Genesis is an allegorical one. The six days of creation and the seventh day of rest came from the Hebraic ethos, which was well established long before the several creation stories of Genesis were written.

The seven day span in Genesis, which has become universally accepted as the measure of the week, could, in fact, originate *only* by way of allegory, because absolutely nothing in nature as we know it is exactly seven days long, nor is any time natural rhythm any multiple of seven days. All the basic measurements of time employed by mankind today, except the week, are based on natural rhythms. A day marks one rotation of the earth on its axis — and this period of time that has been divided into hours, which have further been divided, following surveyors’ practice once the earth had been proven to be round, into minutes and seconds. The *lunar* month corresponds to the phases of the moon and also provides a raw framework for our

calendar month. The year marks one revolution of the earth around the sun. The seven-day week does not exist as a natural reality; it is a convention created by humans, specifically by the Hebrews.

Incidentally, many time-spans, somehow, seem to amount to seven years, and showed up long before modern biologists announced the amazing discovery that every cell in the human body is replaced every seven years. For example, it takes about seven years for a baby to develop the use of reason, another seven years to arrive at puberty, and yet another to become what we term as an adult. It's been said that a person needs about seven years to get over the loss of a loved one. There is talk about the "seven-year itch." And so on. It is quite possible that such rhythms were recognized by the ancients, so that the number "7" took on a very special significance in their minds.

For whatever reasons, the ancient Hebrews, following the wisdom of their folklore, did have a special regard for the number 7. They were observing the seventh day as a day of rest long before the creation stories of Genesis were written. Their account of the six days of creation and a seventh day of rest by God (Who, in our philosophical understanding, is pure ACT and never actually rests), was obviously intended to bolster a religious practice of observing the Sabbath, a practice already in vogue, and one that has been canonized not only by the Christian Church, but even by modern secular society because of an instinctive need for periodic rest from one's labors, worries and daily concerns.

Biblical fundamentalists don't understand this and maintain, despite all geological evidence to the contrary, that the world was literally created in six days some six thousand years ago. They rest their case on the inspired "Word of God," who "cannot lie."

However, like Aesop and many others, the authors of Scripture wrote to teach a lesson, not to impart knowledge about how the physical creation of the world came about. When understood in that light, as an allegory, there is no contradiction between Sacred Scripture and an evolving cosmos (which, incidentally, is still expanding today!), nor in one in which evolution plays some sort of role.

The "Six Days of Creation" is an allegory used to teach a rule of conduct: keep holy the Lord's Day. Amazingly, nearly the entire human race has adopted the seven day week as a standard measure of time, notwithstanding its lack of a counterpart in the rhythms of nature.

The Creation Story

Most everyone, at one time or another, has wondered about past generations, the origins of human life, and where did it all start?

Modern geological studies of the earth offer convincing evidence that Planet Earth has existed for billions of years. Similarities of physical makeup between closely related species suggest to some that the myriad life forms we see today might well be the result of an evolutionary process of some sort.

Christian fundamentalists, on the other hand, insist that the world was created from nothing by God in six days some 6,000 years ago. It is an account that comes to us from the ancient Hebrews, recorded in the Christian Bible in Gen. 1:1 – 2:26 and canonized by the Catholic Church. Traditionally, this story of creation is held to be an accurate account of how the world came to be by most Christian churches, and most emphatically by modern fundamentalists. The simplistic defense of this position is that it is the “Word of God,” who cannot lie.

Actually, there are too many inexplicable contradictions in the account itself to make this fundamentalistic position at all tenable. Creation of the world is described in Genesis according to the Hebrews’ cosmology, in which the descriptions all make sense. To them, the earth was essentially flat. The sky was a sort of huge, inverted dome that “separated the waters above (source of rain) from the waters below (source of springs and wells).” (1:7) This dome also served as a framework upon which God hung the heavenly bodies (sun, moon, stars) and upon which He moved them about to create the the cycle of day and night.

Accepting this creation story as factual history brings one face to face with conundrums that requires miracles for their solution. Why did God create light on the first day, three days before he made the sun and the moon to govern the day and night respectively, and when there were as yet no eyes to need light so as to see? And how were those first several days measured, before the creation of the sun, whose apparent rising and setting define the day?

There are also internal contradictions, both expressions of which cannot be true. In the first story of creation, God creates man on the sixth day, **after** having created all the fish, birds, and terrestrial animals. (1:25 – 26.) In the second story, man is created **before** the animals (2:18 – 20.) How could God say one thing in chapter 1 and explain things in such a contradictory way in chapter 2?

And, later in the account, we’ll run across descriptions of a flood that is literally and physically impossible, “covering the highest mountain top.” (7:19-20.)

Who witnessed the events of the first five days of creation so as to be able to tell about them? According to the creation account, man came into a world (on the sixth day) that already existed, having been created in its fullness during the five preceding days. How, then, could he have known about all the details of how it had been created? And if the creation story was dictated by God, who knows all the intricate details, why wouldn't He tell us what the world was really like, rather tell us (in His inspired Word) that the Hebrews' perception of it was scientifically correct? Another thing. Fundamentalists of our day insist that every detail of the creation story must be accepted as factual. For example, that the sky is a dome that separates waters above from the air space below, and forms a framework upon which the Creator hangs the heavenly bodies (stars, sun, moon) to rule the day and the night. How can they explain that God, who cannot tell a falsehood, is actually doing so when He paints such an erroneous picture of the world that He made? They cannot. But it does make a very nice allegory.

The creationist version of the story of the origins of the earth posits far too many contradictions to be accepted as actual history. Nonetheless, the creationist cites it as the "Word of God," and this, in his understanding, trumps all other considerations. Never mind the mountains of physical evidence pointing to a world that has been billions of years in the making, the impossibility of a worldwide flood (7:19-20), the anomaly of a serpent that talked (3:4), and the instantaneous origins of multiple languages in the story of Babel (11:7). All of these explanations require miracles upon miracles. Any rational man would not, and in fact could not, prefer such a scenario to a reasonable explanation.

There *is* a more reasonable explanation, and it is this. The Genesis account of creation *is not history at all*. Nor can it be. Rather, it is allegory. Allegory is a literary form that expresses truth by means of a story. It has been used by countless authors and teachers such as Jesus Himself when he spoke in parables, and, perhaps better known to the youth of our day, Aesop in his fables or, for that matter, Yogi Bear!

When we read the Parable of the Prodigal Son for example, it wouldn't do to spend our time trying to establish when and where the incident in the story took place, simply because that doesn't matter. In fact, to do so would be to miss the point of the story entirely, namely to show that God is not only willing, but anxious to forgive the sinner and is even extravagant in the blessings He showers upon those who repent.

When we read the story of the tortoise and the hare in Aesop's fables, we miss the point of the story (that steady progress wins the race), if we spend our time and effort "proving" that the story could not possibly have taken place because hares and tortoises cannot talk.

In the same way, we miss the truths that Genesis seeks to impart if we cling to the position that the whole thing is historical, as if it actually happened in six 24-hour days some six thousand years ago. (Some have even calculated an exact number of years.) The creation story in Genesis is written in the worldview of the ancient Hebrew. They saw the world as it appeared to them, and had to write their story – their allegory – in those terms. Even if they described a world that doesn't actually exist (that is, a world that was essentially flat, with a dome for a sky, water above and below, etc.), it takes not an iota away from the story's real messages, which include:

- * There is only one God, and God is good;
- * God created the whole universe and everything in it, and saw that it was good;
- * God is compassionate and not only generous, but extravagant in his blessings (a point that is all too often lost in the Christian world's preoccupation with sin).
- * Evil was not created by God, nor by any evil demigod. It came from man.

The ancient Hebrews were convinced with religious faith that these factors were real and operative. They saw what their world was like. They had their ideas about God, and the authors of Genesis created a beautiful allegory, packed with their theology, to share these ideas with others and with their progeny.

In bringing forth the allegory of Genesis, the Hebrews apparently adopted a similar story as one that was told in neighboring Babylonian circles, and modified it to express their own religious dogmas, especially in matters where their convictions differed from those of the Babylonians. The Babylonian Creation Stories, which date back to approximately the 12th century BC, were written in cuneiform and found in the ruins of the palace of Ashurbanipal in Nineveh. An English translation can be found at <http://www.cresourcei.org/enumaelish.html>.

What is most important to remember is that Genesis 1:1 – 11:26 is allegorical in nature. So we don't need to sweat contradictory details and the like. Just read it as the allegory that it is, and the true meanings will become quite evident especially when contrasted with their pagan counterparts.

Adam and Eve and the Garden of Eden Genesis 1-3

The authors of Genesis, describing their world and its possible origins, had to account for it as they saw it in the limited vision of their experience. They found themselves in an imperfect world. They witnessed murders, insurrections, dishonesty, sexual deviations and all other sorts of evils in the world that God had made. Even apart from what they considered moral wrongs, there were the natural evils. It was difficult to wrest a living from the land, what with the droughts, floods, insects, ravenous beasts and the like. Their women screamed in pain as they brought forth their offspring. How could a

God who was all Good create a world that was seemingly filled to the brim with bad things, persons, and such adverse conditions?

It was an awesome challenge. The solution was both simple and profound. The evil in the world was not the Creator's doing; it was man's. Their creation story had to include an account of how the world that the Creator had made, all of which God "saw was good," (and which we still acknowledge as basically good) changed into the hostile place in which they found themselves living. Their solution was an allegory: the story of the "fall" of our first parents. For reasons already cited, it could not be anything but allegory. It was simply a way of showing that evil came not from God, but from the creatures who were created in his image.

The garden of Eden, in which the man and the woman had been placed, is depicted as leaving nothing to be desired. It was, indeed, all good. Everything was in order. It was limned as an ideal world, a utopia in which there was no pain, no suffering, no evil, no concupiscence, no problems of any kind — the all-good world that came from the creative hand of God.

The tree represented as offering the forbidden fruit was more than just another fruit tree, be it apple, date, pomegranate or whatever. It was unique and special — the "tree of the knowledge of good and evil" (Gen. 2:9). The temptation to partake of its fruit might have played on the Babylonian concept of many gods, suggesting that Adam and Eve may have thought that they could become like one of them, or even like the God who walked in the garden with them. At any rate, such thoughts must surely have been lurking in the minds of the devout Hebrew who would read this account.

The faculty of knowing good and evil meant more to the ancients than simply recognizing something as good or bad — right or wrong. It meant, rather, the power to *determine* what was good and what was bad — akin to the "subjective morality," about which we hear so much today. In other words, the temptation of Adam and Eve was portrayed as ambition to rise to the level of God Himself, who alone designed the earth and the heavens and who thus alone established, in his plan of creation, what was right and what was wrong.

In the story, it would take some powerful convincing to persuade the Man and the Woman, created as they were in a perfect state of being (but, mind you, not necessarily a "supernatural" state), to partake of the forbidden fruit at the risk forfeiting their immortality. Again, the resourceful Hebrew imagination came up with the idea of portraying the serpent (alluding, quite probably, to some evil Babylonian demigod) as the most cunning of God's creatures, and having it tempt Eve into eating the forbidden fruit by leading her to believe that doing so would improve their already splendid condition, elevating them to the level of divinity itself, with the power of deciding what

was good and what was evil. That, in the authors' minds, could comprise the effective bait to get the Man and Woman to disobey God's command, and bring upon themselves the curse of mortality about which God had warned: "on the day you eat of it you shall surely die!" Here the authors of Genesis were dealing with a basic fact of life that they already knew from long experience: that every human being must ultimately die. That's just the way it is and always has been. It was the world as the ancient Hebrew found it.

Interestingly enough, the "curse" was not carried out, at least not literally. Adam and Eve, the only humans on earth, did not die "on the day" that they ate the forbidden fruit." Rather, they became the mortal beings that the Hebrews knew in their own life-experiences; every man and every woman was destined, some day, to die. But over and above that, God's blessings upon Adam and Eve continued – extravagantly. They were blessed with progeny, lived to be 930 years old (at least Adam did, according to the story; how old women got deserved little attention in the Hebrew mind), and had many sons and daughters. Theirs was all of creation to enjoy, to populate with their offspring, to enjoy the good things in the world, to eat of its fruits etc.

The authors of Genesis taught some important lessons here. God is good. Man is essentially good but capable of evil, and that there is a good future to be hoped for because God is extravagant in his blessings despite man's innate penchant for wickedness. Adopting this view of humanity runs counter to one traditional Christian viewpoint, namely that mankind is basically evil (born in sin) but capable of being redeemed and, in fact, needing redemption.

In painting the created world as they saw it, they also gave a convenient and plausible, though allegorical, explanation for other matters that were quite familiar to the Hebrew people; that man has to work hard to make a living; that giving birth is painful for women; that people instinctively covered their genitals without knowing why they should; and snakes crawl on their belly. All these characteristics of human life are accounted for in the allegorical curse.

Aesop's fables, comic strips and cartoons are an art form of all their own, and are often instructive, affirming, or at least entertaining. It doesn't matter that they portray "creatures" that are not found in our natural world. No lion ever existed that rewarded a mouse for pulling a thorn from its paw, but the message of the fable comes through, namely, that good deeds do not go unrewarded. Such allegories, far from being frivolous or, worse, mendacious, can be powerful teachers. Jesus himself, when speaking to the crowds, taught them "in the form of parables." (Mt 13:34.) A parable is simply a specialized form of allegory.

Why must the story of Adam and Eve and their fall be seen as an allegory, and not as history?

- * It describes the invisible God in anthropomorphic terms.
- * Serpents, like the one that tempted Eve, don't talk, nor did they ever "*not* crawl on their bellies," nor are they intelligent.
- * A "tree of knowledge of good and evil" is obviously allegorical.
- * According to the story, Adam and Eve were expelled from the garden but the garden itself was not destroyed, but guarded, and so would be presumed to have remained in existence. However, it has never been found.
- * The "cherubim" that "guard the way to the Tree of Life" and which, according to later theology, consisted of a choir of angels, remains unmentioned in all the rest of Genesis.
- * It speaks of objects that aren't part of our real world and therefore call for allegorical interpretation, namely, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, the (still existing) Garden of Eden from which Adam and Eve were expelled but which was not destroyed, the "Cherubim" and "the fiery revolving sword" (a metaphor for the hot desert sun, perhaps?) guarding the way to the tree of life.
- * Seeing it as allegory, while preserving all of its teaching values, sidesteps difficulties that reasonable people have with certain conclusions resulting from a literal interpretation. For example, the Church teaches that God personally and individually creates every human being "in His own image and likeness"; how then, can we maintain that every baby, being born in sin, is therefore abhorrent to the very God who created it, and cannot enter Heaven without having the sin removed in baptism?

Consider, too, the obvious allegories of the seven-day-week, of a world created to conform to an ancient cosmology that has long since been proven false, of a God who walked in the garden (how do pure spirits "walk"?) and rested (God never rests!), and of the story of a physically impossible flood (Gen. 7 & 8) and the incredible explanation of how different languages and races had their origin in the story of the Tower of Babel (Gen 9:1-11). It is utterly illogical to consider this story historical. To make it such requires miracle upon miracle as far-fetched solutions to seemingly insoluble problems of interpretation.

Most importantly, to interpret Genesis 1-11 as allegory is not to deny the Bible as God's Word, but to embrace it. After all, the focus is not on the narrative of the allegory, but on the lessons that the narrative are meant to teach. It's more important, for example, to hold that it was our one God who created the world than to hold that he did it in six days some 6000 years ago, and we can still observe the Sabbath, regardless. It is more important to realize that man is good but capable of evil, than to believe that a platonic Garden of Eden actually ever existed. It is important to see that human free will, which empowers him to love, is the very power which, in its abuse, brings evil into the world; that suffering is, for us mortals, simply a part of human life rather than a result of some progenitor eating forbidden fruit.

Cain and Abel

Genesis 4-5

The story of Cain and Abel is well known. The story has it that Cain and Abel, both of them sons of Adam and Eve, found different occupations. Cain was a “tiller of the soil” while Abel was a “keeper of flocks.”

In time, the two of them felt the need to offer sacrifice (which is a new concept at this point) to the Lord God. Cain offered some fruits of the soil, while Abel offered one of the best firstlings of his flock. God, the story continues, was pleased with Abel’s sacrifice, but, for some untold reason, was not pleased with Cain’s. Cain was consumed with jealousy and killed Abel.

So, here we have the first story of a violent crime, and it is portrayed as having occurred in the first generation of humanity, suggesting that wickedness is part and parcel of human existence. This crime represented the beginning of wickedness in the world and man rising up against man, a situation of which the Ancients were as well aware as are we today. The crime was not lost upon the Lord God, who roundly scolded Cain, but also “put a mark on him,” to prevent anyone from slaying him in retribution for his crime. Cain then moved away and settled “in the land of Nod, east of Eden,” probably becoming a nomad (the name “Nod” means “Land of the Nomads.”)

Most people who retell the story end it there. Abel was dead and was replaced by the only other offspring of Adam and Eve that is specifically mentioned in Genesis, namely Seth. Even though not one more child of Adam is named, Cain does find a woman who could bear him a son. We can’t be too critical of the story line here; after all, it is an allegory, and apparently woman was not all that important to the ancient Hebrew. After all, in this totally patriarchal society, it was the man’s “seed” that carried on the lineage; the woman was merely the “garden” in which the man planted the seed. Be that as it may, the theme of the Cain and Abel story is not complete at this point. The writer saw two more gaps that needed to be filled between the story of Cain and the authors’ present.

The first gap was the burgeoning of wickedness in the human race. The story of Abel’s murder is only the beginning of the evil that was to develop among men, which would build to the point where God would repent (imagine that — God repenting!) of having created “evil” mankind and resolved to destroy it with a gigantic flood, as was to be told in the story of Noah.

The other gap was that generations upon generations of long-living men were needed to fill the entire world with Adam’s children, to account for the multitude of people on earth, so wicked that, in the Hebrew’s concept of crime and punishment, it could prompt

God to wipe out all living flesh from the face of the earth. The writers accomplished this by means of a generation-by-generation description of the lineage from Adam down to Noah, to set the scene for the gigantic flood in which everything living was to be wiped off the face of the earth, save for Noah, his family, and a pair of each species of the “unclean” animals and seven pair of the “clean” species to repopulate the earth (not to mention fish, which would hardly be destroyed in a flood!)

The lineage from Adam to Noah is as follows. In addition to listing a series of Noah’s ancestors back to Adam, the writer also tells how long each of these people lived, as well as the age of the father when each person in the succession was born. In the following listing, the number following each man in the list is the man’s age when the named son was born. Adam (130), Seth (105), Enosh (90), Kenan (70), Mahalalel (65), Jared (162), Enoch (65), Methuselah (187), Lamech (182), and Noah. Thus, according to this account, the human race was 1056 years old when Noah was born. The life span of each man was listed in the lineage and varied from 365 years (for Enoch) to 969 years (for Methuselah). Specifically mentioned for each is also that they “had other sons and daughters.”

In this dramatic way, the writer builds up a scenario that would have the world populated with billions upon billions of people by the time of the flood. However the extent of the world’s population is not important here, except to show that the world would have been populated by a huge number of people by the time of the flood. Thus, in this allegory, the writer speaks about the vast number of people living on the face of the earth, and how wickedness had burgeoned among them as exponentially as their generations.

The story of these generations of humans, and the extremely long lives they were said to have lived, is yet another clue to the fact that the story is allegorical in nature. After all, it would be utterly preposterous to think that one man could remember all these details, and the only one who could have passed them all along to us would have been Noah, since presumably any recorded records prior to the flood would have been destroyed in it (Noah received no orders to carry along a genealogical record!) And Noah, of course, had plenty of other problems to occupy his mind and body following the flood! (Chalk up yet another miracle, of inspiration, for the fundamentalists to explain.)

As with all allegories, the emphasis is not on the individual elements in the story, as though they were historical fact, but on the lesson that the allegory is attempting to teach. In this case, it might well be yet another testament to the fact that human beings are sinful, or, if you prefer, wicked, and that this is the reason for God’s creation of mankind. It is simply an inevitable by-product of creating man “in His image and likeness” by endowing mankind with intelligence and free will.

Noah, The Flood and Noah's Posterity

Genesis 6:5 – 10:32

We who are living in the twenty-first century AD often hear the exclamation “What’s this world coming to”? Or something similar to that, as we hear tale upon tale of some crime or other going on in our country, our neighborhood or the world. The media are replete with stories of crimes, disorderly conduct, greed and the like that are unfolding all over the globe. It’s been that way for centuries. Aristotle, who lived in the fourth century BC, is quoted as having said that “the younger generation is going to the dogs.” And there are plenty of fundamentalists who read signs for the coming end of the world in the tragedies of our own day.

It was probably no different for the Ancient Hebrews. Apparently the human condition had reached a crisis point in the mind of those who authored this particular part of Genesis, all the more so if the Hebrew nation was a devoutly religious tribe that had such deep faith in the one good God whom they worshipped as Yahweh. There were rumors about the Babylonians having had children sired by evil gods, the resultant offspring being responsible for all havoc that evil men, mostly from the pagan nations, were inflicting upon the human population. People were becoming more and more wicked as time went on, as was already alluded to in the story of Cain and Abel.

So, the story has God looking upon the world that He had created, seeing all the evil stuff going on and how everyone was abandoning the way of righteousness, actually repented of having created mankind in the first place! The story of Noah and the flood is another allegory that has God flooding the entire earth with water so as to kill off all the living things He had created. In this way the authors expressed a holy and righteous dismay at all the evil that they witnessed in their world.

However, if all the world’s living creatures were destroyed in a flood, how would one account for the fact that the world still has innumerable people in it? That would call for either another creation story, or the story as we see it in Genesis, that has one righteous man on the face of the earth who found favor with God. His name was Noah and he was 600 years old at the time. He was instructed by God to build a huge boat, called an “ark,” waterproof it, and gather animals of all kinds into it, and enter it himself with his wife and children and their wives, so as to repopulate the earth once again. Then, the Lord God would unleash a global flood on all the world so as to kill, by drowning, all of the animal and human life that He had created, save for the living creatures aboard the ark, who would be spared. Incidentally, though God states, in the story, that He intends to “wipe out from the surface of the earth every moving creature that I have made, (7:5), nothing is said about how this would destroy the fish. Another indication of an analogy.

Noah, the story goes on to say, obeyed the Lord's command and survived, along with his children and their spouses, to repopulate the world, and become a model of obeying God's commands and a hero for saving the human race from extinction. The emphasis here is upon the sinfulness of man and also reflects the very human concept of appropriate and necessary punishment for crime.

Certain fundamentalist groups attempt desperately today to harmonize the physical reality of a global flood that lasted for a whole year with their knowledge about the known world. But in trying to defend the thesis that the story of Noah was factual history that took place at a definite time and place, they are speaking from an untenable position because their arguments fly in the face of known physical facts.

The most logical argument against interpreting the story of Noah as literal history lies in a simple question of science: Where did all that water come from, and where did it go when it ebbed to expose the dry land once again? The story makes sense only if one's worldview is the primitive one described in the Creation story, i.e., that our world is surrounded by water, which is kept from falling onto the earth by means of a huge physical dome called the sky. Once it is conceded that this is not geologically true, the story of Noah's flood becomes an impossible fantasy.

The fundamentalists argue that the story of the flood must be true because other ancient peoples have recorded similar incidents whose details closely match the story of Noah. It is, indeed, true that ancient Babylonian writings had similar stories, notably in the Gilgamesh. But this does not prove the reality of the event. Rather, it shows that the author used such stories as a framework for his own story, and modified it to fit his own image of God, of evil, and of the universe, much as was also done in the story of Creation.

Simple mathematics tells us that the water level would have to rise at an average rate of approximately 30 feet per hour ($29,000/40/24$) to cover the highest mountains in 40 days and 40 nights. That's an incredible rate of rise in the water level, even if part of it was coming from underground, from the "abyss of the deep," as the story has it. Even if it did, a further question arises: where did the water go after the rain stopped? It may have gone back into the "void" in the Hebrew's understanding of the universe, but would be obviously impossible on a globe such as our Planet Earth.

According to the story, Noah and his wife and family and daughters-in-law were sealed into the ark by God, a week before the rains started. After the rains ended, they remained sealed in for another 300 days, for a total of 347 days, surviving on stores of food that they had put on board to feed themselves and the animals for the duration. Problems of sanitation would have taken on gigantic proportions, not to mention all the

food they would have needed to keep all the animals alive for a year. The only non-problem was that there would be no lack of potable water!

Unless a miracle intervened, another problem would arise. After the earth was covered with water for 300 days, there would have been no vegetation left on the earth, except possibly for underwater plants such as algae and kelp, because all land-based trees and other plants would have literally drowned. Nowhere would the dove that was released have been able to find a green olive branch to bring back. And there certainly would have been nothing for the survivors, whether brute or human, to eat. All living flesh, including that which survived the flood itself, would have starved to death in a global famine!

These are just a few of the blatant difficulties, nay, impossibilities, that arise if one interprets the story as literal history.

The story would also seem to imply that a natural phenomenon, the rainbow, did not exist prior to the flood, because God is presenting it to Noah as gift, as a sign of a new covenant with him and his posterity. God would see the rainbow and remember his promise never to destroy life on earth by water, ever again. Now, we know for a fact that a rainbow is formed when sunlight is broken into light of different wavelengths by the prismatic action of rainfall, and that such a phenomenon occurs after rain when the sun, emerging from behind clouds is in a certain range of position positions. That is a hard fact of physics, and was already occurring long before Noah's time. But in the Noah story, the rainbow is something that God "set in the sky" as a sign of a new covenant with Noah and all mankind, assuring humanity that it would never again be destroyed by a flood, and implying that there was no rainbow prior to the flood.

Again, the fact that the writer apparently paid no attention to all the factors that would make such a story incredible to the reader shows that it was intended as an allegory. Just as surely as mother told the story of the crowdad in the cookie jar without ever believing the story to be literally true, so the sacred writer could get his point across without having to be a geologist or a historian or a meteorologist or a farmer or all of the above. The allegorical explanation is the only one that truly fits in all respects, and this is the interpretation that must be accepted by persons who are studying the history of the Hebrews and trying to discern what the Scriptures are intended to teach.

Of course, each and every one of these anomalies, as well as others not listed here, could be explained by postulating a miracle on the part of God. But, as stated above, that's a totally unacceptable way to interpret Scripture when rational explanations are at hand to explain the paradoxes.

The author of the story simply intends to teach that man is sinful, and that God is an avenging God who sets everything right by destroying the wicked (at least, that conformed to the authors' understanding of how God would avenge the wicked). Except perhaps for one more thing that the author apparently wanted to "explain," namely, why it was all right for the Israelites to enslave the Canaanites because of certain indecent sexual practices of the Canaanites, such as sodomy and bestiality, along with human sacrifice (see Lev. 18:19-24 and 20:23). Incidentally, it also offers an explanation of sorts for the variation in skin colors, such as the black skin of those whom the Hebrews enslaved. This is explained by telling of a curse that Noah lays on Canaan, the son of Ham, in response to Ham's making fun of his father when he saw him lying drunk and naked in his tent, while his two brothers, Shem and Japheth, were blessed for covering their father's body, bringing the cover in backwards so that they would not see his nakedness.

The Tower of Babel Genesis 11:1-26

Another reality of the world in which the Hebrews lived was that there were people who spoke in ways that the Hebrew could not understand. And so, to complete the allegory that set the scene for what was to follow in the story of Abraham, yet another story was added to explain the confusion by presenting a scenario of how these various strange languages originated. It was the story of the Tower of Babel.

The narrative starts with the statement that "the whole world spoke the same language." (Gen. 11:1). The statement is made despite one having been made in Gen. 10:5 that each of the clans descending from Japheth was "with its own language. The story then goes on to say that some men who gathered in the valley of Shinar decided to build a "city and a tower with its top in the sky" so as to "make a name for themselves lest they be scattered all over the earth". They were apparently talking about building a temple tower known as a ziggurat. (For some reason that is not very apparent from the text,) the Lord God looked down, saw what was happening, and confused their speech, so that nobody knew what the other was saying. The story concludes with "That is why it (the place) was called Babel, because there the Lord confused the speech of all the world."

Obviously, this was an allegory which, like the other allegories that preceded it, gave an account of how the world, as the Hebrews knew it, came to be the way it was, namely, that many of the world's citizens spoke with different words and different language, so that the Hebrew and other tribes could not understand each other.

The authors obviously felt that one more lead-in to the story of Abraham was necessary to tell of the generations between Noah and Abraham, and this is done in Gen. 11:10-

26. The format is the same as in previous genealogies, where the age of the father is given when he had the son who was next in the line of descendants.

All of this is done in preparation of leading the reader from the creation of the world to the call of Abraham. It is called protohistory, a word signifying that the story antedates history, and merely sets the scene in which the truly historical accounts, as found Genesis 12:11ff are set. The lineage is as follows: Noah (500), Shem (100), Arpachshad (35) Shelah, (30) Eber, (34) Peleg, (30) Reu, (32) Serug, (30), Nahor (29), Terah, (70) Abram (later changed to Abraham).

Each of Noah's descendants had "other sons and daughters", that lived for an average of 272 years. So, in addition to having the named descendants at an earlier age than what we saw in earlier genealogies, they still lived long lives. Again, the names and ages are not to be taken as literal historical facts, but they do indicate a considerable time between Noah and Abraham — enough to make credible the repopulation of the earth after the flood, considering that they started having babies at a relatively earlier age and lived on though great lengths of time.

When all of these factors are considered, the only acceptable interpretation of Genesis 1:1 to 11:26 is that it is allegorical, and not historical, in nature. This, in turn, gives rise to some very serious difficulties for the Christian Church and the acceptability of its theology. The remainder of this essay is devoted to pointing out some of these difficulties.

Ramifications of an Allegorical Interpretation of Genesis 1:1-11:26

It's no wonder that Christians have clung to a literal historical interpretation of the first eleven chapters of Genesis through the centuries. It made everything about their faith so clear cut, easy to understand and teach. Incidents that seemed impossible were accepted as literally true nonetheless, because "with God all things are possible." It didn't matter that God often walked with people and talked to people (though He apparently gave that up long ago!), or that a global flood was physically impossible, serpents talked, or that God created the world in two different ways, or that the Creation events were written down by persons who didn't even exist at the time. As the traditional understanding of these events, and especially the implausible ones, goes, we human beings cannot comprehend God's ways, but God can do anything so He must have had some way of bringing these incidents about, even though they seem contradictory to us.

The stories were apparently accepted as literally and historically true by the many prophets and other authors of the Old Testament, by Jesus Himself (or at least in the minds of the evangelists who wrote His story), and by Christian theologians and preachers through the ages. Thus the pronouncements and writings of the prophets, the psalms, and historical books of the Old Testament, along with any other book that cited or referred to the first eleven chapters of Genesis, were also interpreted and accepted as historically factual. At least, that's the way it was told to us. That these events were accepted as historical is evidenced, for example, by publication of Bible Histories, which depicted the stories of Genesis along with others as actual historical events.

A "believe all — doubt nothing" philosophy established a position of power with regard to teaching. Once the Sacred Scriptures were canonized as the "Word of God," no room was left for argumentation or for any acceptance of an allegorical view. Preachers could speak convincingly, secure in the "knowledge" that they were passing along the message from on high, confident that theirs was the only position that had the correct teaching about everything theological and spiritual because, after all, it came from God Himself and was therefore incontrovertible and left no room for differing views!

Naturally, difficulties arose with this interpretation. A literal interpretation of the Scriptures leads to contradictions that would have to be accounted for. Was man created before the brute animals or after them? Could serpents actually talk in Eden? There are also awkward situations. Did God create light before he created the heavenly illuminating bodies? If so, why would he do such a thing, when there were as yet no eyes to see it? What about the ancient's defective cosmology that has God creating a world such as does not exist? Who was there to witness the first five days of Creation so as to pass the story on to his or her descendants? And so on.

Such difficulties disappear when the protohistory of Genesis, along with subsequent writings citing it, are seen as allegorical in nature. We don't have to believe that the characters and events described these scriptures actually existed or took place to learn the scripture's lesson, any more than we need to regard the story of Aesop's "The Lion and the Mouse" as factual history. If we can regard Genesis 1-11 as allegory, we can learn its lessons without actually believing the exact details of events as they are told in the story. In fact, to hold that persons described there actually existed, and that they acted exactly as the story relates, is to expose oneself to well deserved ridicule.

Besides, such literal interpretations require miracle upon miracle — actions and events that run counter to the natural order of things. For example, if the story of Noah and the flood is taken literally, the waters of the flood would have to have risen at the phenomenal average rate of *30.24 feet per hour* for forty days and nights. (Do the math! $30.24 \text{ feet} \times 24 \text{ (hours)} \times 40 \text{ (days)} = 29,029 \text{ feet}$, the elevation of Mt. Everest)

not only would all animal life (except fish and other aquatic animals) been wiped out; all land-based vegetation would have been destroyed as well. Whence came all that water, and where did it go when it ebbed? Only the ancient's cosmology could possibly support such a scenario. If interpreted as an allegory, the impossibilities and incongruities simply don't matter any more. They are only devices to teach a philosophical truth. And that's infinitely more believable!

Accepting allegories as history also produced, in time, other insurmountable problems in scriptural interpretation. For example, it told of humanity that was once in a perfect state, that fell from that state by its sin and therefore needed a redeemer to bring it back into the good graces of the Almighty. The redemptionist theology that was thus spawned gives rise to certain anomalies.

- * It paints God the Father, this Almighty God who was Love Itself, as a sadistic tyrant who had to be appeased (as a despotic human being might) by the ultimate sacrifice: the cruel and ignominious death of an only Son.
- * The newborn child, created in the image of God Himself, was held to be tainted by sin and unfit to enter into God's presence should he die without "justification."
- * New categories and concepts had to be created to explain such a situation, the most abstruse of which was the concept of "sanctifying grace," which, we are told, is a sharing in the Divine Life by a creature who, according to Genesis, was created in God's image in the first place.
- * Baptism is required to restore this "grace" to the child, who, if baptized as an infant, has not as yet attained the use of reason and therefore cannot "repent" of the "sin" with which he was born. Baptism is seen as a magical procedure that produces this result automatically, with no participation, or even awareness, by the child. The procedure calls for the pronouncing an exact formula (mind you), recited simultaneously with pouring of water (or immersion in it), in order to be effective. Say it wrong, for example, like some Protestants who baptize "In the Name of the Trinity," and no "Grace" is conferred. That comes very close to, and has all the trappings of, magic, which is so abhorrent to the pious Christian's ear.

Even though the information that the protohistory of Genesis contained was not scientifically accurate, it seemed plausible to the ancient Hebrews, considering their limited worldview. More importantly, however, it provided an effective vehicle for teaching the truths that the ancient authors wanted to teach. Even Jesus Himself taught by means of the parable, a literary form in its own right. Nobody would assert that Jesus was referring to an actual person or event when He told the parable of the prodigal son, for example, nor would it have added anything to his teaching if it were. There is no plausible reason why the same should not apply to the stories of Gen. 1-11:26.

Confusing the narrative with the lesson it is meant to teach, as is done by creationist fundamentalists, is extremely dangerous and misleading, as we might see exemplified if we render literal, rather than poetic, reading of Joyce Kilmer's classic poem, *Trees*. Suppose an extraterrestrial visitor came to a burned out Earth some centuries or millenia from now. Scouring a barren landscape denuded of all vegetation, he stumbles upon a copy of Kilmer's poem, which was somehow preserved. Suppose also that the visitor knows English. If he would then read the poem as a scientific document, rather than as the poem that it is, he would certainly get a very erroneous impression about the nature of a tree! Let's see. (Read the parenthetical statements to see how misleading such an approach would be, and what sort of botanical picture of a tree would emerge!)

"I think that I shall never see a poem as lovely as a tree...." (Aha! A tree is a poem – whatever that is) "...A tree whose hungry mouth is pressed against the earth's sweet flowing breast...." (The tree has a mouth and nurses at the breast. It must have been a mammal.) "...A tree that looks at God all day..." (The tree is a an intelligent creature that can see God) "...and lifts its leafy arms to pray..." (The tree is a religious being and has arms.) "...A tree that may in summer wear a nest of robins in her hair..." (Trees have hair and are female) "...Upon whose bosom snow has lain ..." (Strange, the tree has a bosom, or breast, just like the earth from which it suckles) "...Who intimately lives with rain..." (Trees enjoy intimacy with the elements) "...Poems are made by fools like me, but only God can make a tree." (The tree, which is a poem, is made by a fool. But only God can make a tree. Therefore, God is a fool.)

No one in his right mind would accuse Joyce Kilmer of trying to convince the scientific community that the parenthetical statements above are actual, botanical truth. On the other hand, neither would anyone deny that the poem has a message that goes beyond the literal meaning of the words. It's the same with the Genesis story. The authors weren't conducting classes in cosmology or history. What they *were* doing was expressing their monotheistic beliefs and philosophies in the setting of a worldview that was implicitly accepted by the Hebrews of their day. As a respected classmate once chided the author of this essay, "Haven't you ever learned that the Bible is half poetry?!" *Touche!*

The truths that the authors were attempting to teach by means of the Genesis allegory are valid. Basically, these truths are that there is only one God; God is good; God is the creator of all else that exists; man is created to be like God in that he, unlike brute animals, has intelligence, free will and creativity; woman is equal in dignity to man, there is much evil in the world, not because God created it, but because God created mankind with free will, which has as an inevitable side effect that man, given his concupiscence, often chooses the evil rather than the good.

In other words, what seem to be historical facts to fundamentalist readers in our day are NOT what the sacred writers wanted to teach. Example. When my mother told me the story about the crow in the cookie jar, she wasn't telling of an event that actually happened, as if that event was important enough to somehow make a difference. However, she was indeed saying that disobedience is wrong. She was not slighted in the least when, one day, I realized the distinction between her allegorical story and the truth she was trying to impart. In fact, she would certainly have been disappointed if I had NOT seen the distinction. We certainly have no problems in doing so with respect to the legends of Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny. If the Church seeks authenticity, she will have to admit the difference between the storied figures in Genesis and the message these stories were meant to convey. Doing so will also sidestep some of the contradictions and impossible scenarios that the allegory holds, such as the impossibility of a global flood, the talking serpent and a miraculous "confusion of tongues" of those building the Tower of Babel.

Innumerable dogmas have developed from the fundamentalistic and literally historical interpretation of Genesis 1-11. The most obvious one is that of Original Sin, which in turn called for a Redeemer and a Sacrifice. These are dogmas that could have fallen by the wayside at the outset, had the allegorical nature of Genesis 1-11 always been acknowledged and respected. The consequences of accepting the account as literal history are mindboggling and, to most of today's Christians, including most of the hierarchy, unthinkable. Pity!

Let's list some of the consequences of accepting Genesis 1:1-11:26 as allegory, rather than as history. Among others, we might list the following.

**ORIGINAL SIN, AS PREACHED BY THE CHURCH TODAY,
IS NOT A REALITY IN THE SENSE EXPLAINED.**

The story itself tells us that man was made in the image and likeness of God, in that human beings were endowed with intelligence and free will. Man is, by his very nature and not by some supernatural phenomenon, such as sanctifying grace, like God. Unlike the brute animals, he can know, reason, love and create. This image of the Divine is, in other words, a natural endowment, an intrinsic and indispensable part of the very definition of the human being. Destroy that endowment, and you have destroyed man — something that was never accomplished by some "original sin." What the story lists as the consequence of Adam's sin — pain in childbearing, difficulties in eking out a living, a sense of shame in being nude in public, concupiscence, etc. — these are simply part and parcel of the human condition that everyone recognizes, and that the authors of Genesis recognized, as natural to man. We wouldn't need the Scriptures to show us what is already so evident, and that is certainly not the burden of the authors' message!

The ancient Hebrew was not in the least concerned about how sin appeared in the world, except to show that it was not the work of some evil deity, as many of the pagan religions of the time were maintaining. Rather, the Hebrew observed evil in his world and created the fable about a Garden of Eden and a utopian existence for our first parents, in order to show that it was not God that brought evil into the world, nor was it the work of some evil deity. Even so, an element is lifted from the pagan accounts, in that the serpent was probably an allusion to one of those evil Babylonian deities.

If Adam and Eve did, in fact, enjoy an idyllic existence and lost it by an offence against God, what of the promises of a Messiah that have been interpreted as having been made to mankind as being fulfilled in the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross? Did this longed for Messiah restore the utopian existence that was lost in the sin of Adam and Eve? No! Does a child regain it in baptism? No! Did Jesus restore it when he died on Calvary? No!

**IF THERE WAS NO “ORIGINAL SIN”,
MANKIND DID NOT NEED A REDEEMER.**

If it's true — and, as we have seen, one can hardly think otherwise — that the story of Adam and Eve is allegory rather than history, there never was a fall from “grace.” Such a concept was completely foreign to the Hebrew's thinking, and it is not accepted by the Jews of our day, even though it was their ancestors who gave us the story! The difficulties encountered in making a living and bearing children, which have traditionally been interpreted as curses, are simply natural features of being human, with all the limitations that being human implies. The Hebrews themselves were not looking for a Messiah who would restore “sanctifying grace” to man and re-open the gates of Heaven. They were far more interested in the prospect of some hero who would deliver them from their enemies and make them a world-ruling nation, as their prophets had proclaimed — a concept that, much later, morphed into a “Redeemer” who would undo “Original Sin” and reopen the gates of Heaven.

The traditional interpretation of Genesis promotes a dualistic theology when it paints the picture of a God who is, on the one hand, love and mercy itself, but on the other hand also a sadistic tyrant who will have his “pound of flesh” for every wrong that is ever committed. In this scenario, the constant blessing and protection of God are overlooked, as the main emphasis is on sin and its humanly demanded punishment. But Genesis is replete with stories of a God who is forever faithful and lavishly showers blessing upon people despite their sinfulness. Jesus didn't promise the good thief Paradise only after having sat out a spell in Purgatory — “This day,” he said, “you will be with me in Paradise!” God is not the vengeful God posited by dualistic spirituality!

God did not carry out the threat he had made when he said: “On the day that you eat of it (the Tree of Knowledge) you shall surely die.” Adam and Eve did not die on that day! (Rather, the story explains the fact that all men must die — according to the nature of mortal flesh.) God actually blessed mankind with productivity to populate the earth; Cain was not destroyed for murdering his brother, but was given an emblem that would shield him from those who would kill him for being a murderer. Noah and his family were spared the ravages of the flood because they were upright in the sight of the Lord. In fact, the entire account in Genesis contains a litany of the untold and continuing blessings that God lavishes upon his chosen people, especially when humans do what is right.

The very notion of “original sin” was unheard of until Augustine developed, or at least canonized, the theory in the fourth century AD. The Church has taught us that “grace” (which is described as the divine presence in man) was lost when Adam sinned and had to be restored to the human race by a suitable sacrifice (of Jesus on Calvary). Every human being, so the teaching goes, comes into the world deprived of this grace, which is restored to the individual when he or she is baptized, when the person baptized receives this divine presence in his personhood whether he knows it or not.

This understanding of “Original Sin” is fraught with inconsistencies and problems that will be readily apparent to any thinking individual. Consider the following.

- * What is described as grace is already and essentially inherent in human nature. Grace is understood as a divine presence in the soul. But that’s already there because we, like Adam and Eve, are created in God’s image. To destroy that image would be to destroy the person.
- * In the traditional understanding, grace is restored by baptism. The essential form of baptism must include at least the pouring of water (though immersion is also OK) with simultaneous recitation of a certain formula: “I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit (or Ghost).” If any of this is altered, the baptism doesn’t take. Such a ritual and the understanding of it bears a striking resemblance to magical incantations, which the Church abhors.
- * In the procedure of infant baptism, the subject isn’t even aware of what is happening. This makes it impossible to see how it can be a sacrament for the recipient, though it might be seen as sacramental to those baptizing or asking that it be performed.
- * Sin, in the traditional interpretation, is a lack of Sanctifying Grace. But every human being is created personally by God and comes into this world as created by Him. Therefore, the child lacks this Sanctifying Grace and God is creating sin, which cannot be true. It would imply that God creates something evil, i.e., something that is not pleasing in his sight, which, of course, is repugnant. Doesn’t it make more sense to understand that “all is Grace”?
- * This mechanical approach to grace and baptism obscures a more important reason for seeking baptism, namely, to identify oneself with the Christian Community. If this

priority is not admitted, it gives rise to the perplexing question for which there would be no plausible answer: “Why did a perfectly sinless Jesus, who was God Himself Incarnate, ask his cousin John to baptize Him?”

* In addition, this understanding of grace tends to make a person’s spiritual life a narcissistic, self-centered quest for perfection and emphasizes increasing one’s self-seeking, personal holiness rather than celebrating God’s love already within us by prompting us to reach out to others, which is the essential goal of the greatest of the theological virtues, namely charity.

All of these difficulties (and others) are sidestepped when we recognized that God does not make junk, doesn’t create anything evil or unfit to come into His presence. Why, then, would He not welcome an innocent child who, through no fault of his own, has died without being baptized?

A side-effect, by way of a bonus, is that if the divine life in the individual is stressed, rather than his sinfulness, life becomes infinitely more of a celebration of all of God’s lavish gifts upon his people. It becomes more of a celebration of what has been received rather than a morose preoccupation with one’s failures.

IF THERE WAS NO ORIGINAL SIN, WHO WAS JESUS AND WHAT DID HE DO?

Does one even dare to ask the question? Yes, one does. If it is recognized that the bulk of the Judeo-Christian faith is based on an allegory, then that faith is, in turn, based on allegory and has to be treated as such. This would not be to say that the Church is preaching a lie — far from it! She’s no more preaching a lie than is the mother who tells her child the story of a crowdad in the cookie jar to teach him obedience. The truth needs to be separated from the allegory — the message from the medium. All too often, the narrative itself has been proclaimed as an item of faith, and this is a mistake. In fact, it is a perennial mistake and it has come to cost the Church much of its credibility in today’s world. If Christianity is to regain its credibility, it will have to deal with the allegory vs. history question realistically and logically, and not simply discard the question by branding it as a product of a misguided rationalism.

Consider how the gospel stories came to be. Like Genesis, many of them consist of monotheistic revisions of contemporary pagan myths, mutatis mutandis. Christmas, for example, is a revised observance of the pagan rite of celebrating the return of the sun after the winter solstice, and proclaims Jesus as the “Light of the World.” There’s a marvelous truth revealed here, but does that mean that Jesus was actually born in a stable in Bethlehem on December 25 of God knows what year? Absolutely not! Like the Genesis story, it contains too many inconsistencies to make that a feasible interpretation. But, no matter. We can well accept that Jesus is the “Light of the World”

without believing that the Bethlehem narrative is historical fact, which, more probably, it is not.

Jesus of Nazareth was one of myriads of “miracle workers” that populated Galilee in His day. What was cited by the gospel writers as proof that this Jesus was actually divine (like all the other miracle-workers were said to be) was that Jesus’ miracles, and especially raising the dead to back to life, actually worked. Only God could bring someone back from the dead, and Jesus did it for Lazarus, for the daughter of Jairus, and, most importantly, for Himself. However, just as there were no witnesses to the creation of the world, there were also no witnesses to the resurrection of Jesus, at least, not among the authors of the New Testament. (The disciples had all run away, remember? And Mary Magdalen found only an empty tomb!) Rather, they are accounts compiled from folklore, some forty to sixty years after the described events, and tailored to fit the theology of the times and the prophecies of old, many of which sprang from some Old Testament allegory or other. The early successors of the apostles painstakingly edited them, discarding as “apocryphal” whatever texts didn’t meet their beliefs or, worse still, declare something opposed to those beliefs.

Strange, isn’t it? At this point, let us leave aside for a moment the question of the validity of the Church’s teaching, and simply consider the origins of the New Testament. The early Church decided what was to be included in the Sacred Scriptures by keeping some texts that were claimed to be inspired, and refusing to include others, and then relied on those same texts to claim that she is infallibly proclaiming the truth as God revealed it. What the church is actually doing is proclaiming that something is true simply “because I said so!” In so doing, it is reversing the flow the learning process from “learning from history” to “making history,” from drawing wisdom from human experience to claiming to have wisdom at the outset and then seeking to change the human experience accordingly.

Thus, though the normal route to truth can be illustrated as
historical events → reasoning process → discovery of truth,
the composing of the Sacred Scriptures proceeded in opposite fashion, thus:
knowledge of truth → illustration via allegory → “historical” facts

Interesting, too, that much of the New Testament (roughly 30%) comes to us from Paul, a self-proclaimed “apostle” who never met Jesus (except in a *subjectively* claimed vision), who was not one of the twelve, but who, in addition to his missionary work, also asserted a heavy influence in the writing of Luke’s Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles. Anyone today who would, in similar fashion, claim to be an apostle because of a vision he or she claimed to have had would be branded as a heretic. We see, for example, that Joseph Smith, the founder of the Mormon Church, had a lot in common with Saul of Tarsus, and yet he is not reckoned among the “apostles” of the Catholic Church.

Nothing of what is being said here is intended to discredit the Bible. Rather, these considerations are presented to help discern the true message of the Scriptures and thus come to a better understanding of the truths that the Scriptures are intended to teach.

SANCTIFYING GRACE IS, ITSELF, A MYTH.

Nowhere in the Bible is there any mention of sanctifying grace. The word “grace” is used often, but always as a description of God’s unmerited favor to man and not as some quality that renders the soul pleasing to God. Sanctifying grace, as understood in Catholic theology, had to be coined by the Church *if* it believed that Adam and Eve were actual human beings created with some sort of supernatural faculty that they lost by prideful disobedience in the Garden of Eden. What is referred to as something supernatural is actually natural to man, inherent in his nature because he is created in God’s very image and thus shares in the Divine Life. Catholics hold that the newborn baby is created in God’s image and likeness just as surely as were Adam and Eve.

EVERY HUMAN IS CONCEIVED IMMACULATE.

If the Genesis story up to Abraham is allegorical in nature, the story of “the Fall” is, most likely, an allegory that simply acknowledges the “vale of tears” in which the early Hebrews found themselves. It’s much more reasonable to accept a teaching of “original sin” that simply tells of the human conditions with all its trials and tribulations, than to accept a teaching of “Original Sin” as a historical fact by which all of mankind lost favor with God through the sin of its only constituents at that time.

David writes, in Psalm 51 verse 7: “In sin was I born, and in sin did my mother conceive me.” This is often cited as a proof text for the doctrine of original sin. However, it might, just as convincingly, be a complaint of David’s for the sinful condition of the world in which he found himself — precisely the reality that the allegory of Genesis teaches. If it is seen as a proof text for original sin, it could also be viewed as casting vulgar and denigrating aspersions on sexual intercourse, which is then regarded as a bad and shameful thing rather than a joyful and productive participation in God’s work of creation.

WHAT ABOUT CHURCH’S CLAIM TO INFALLIBILITY?

The major stumbling block to a reconsideration of the Genesis story as allegory lies in the mentality of the Catholic Church’s hierarchy, which cannot bring itself to admit that

the Church might have been wrong. Infallible teachers can't bend! History tells of several instances where the Church has been wrong in her teaching. By all the rules of logic, one instance of being wrong is sufficient to discredit the Church's claim of infallibility, because a universal negative statement ("The Church can NEVER fall into error...") is disproved by a particular positive ("The Church fell into error when...").

For example, the Church, at the Second Council of Vienna (1305-1314), proclaimed the following: "If anyone falls into the error of pertinaciously presuming to affirm that charging interest on a loan is not sinful, our decision is that he is to be punished as a heretic." (*Denziger-Bannwart 479.*) This question of charging interest on a loan is based on immutable natural law. In other words, what is in accord with natural law at a given time cannot be contrary to natural law at another time. The church, taking its cue from certain Sacred Scriptures (notably Lev 25:36 and Dt 23:20) condemned taking interest on a loan at one time, but today no one in the church would make such an assertion. In fact, the Church does a great deal of lending and borrowing (with interest).

The Church tries to explain its way out of this dilemma by saying that the nature of money changed — that it was unproductive before the Industrial Revolution, but is now productive. The major flaw in this argument lies in the fact that money WAS doubtless productive before the Industrial Revolution, or else, why was the Church so vociferous in condemning the practice of taking interest on a loan? The fiasco with Galileo, who was confined to house arrest for contradicting the Scriptures by insisting that the earth moved around the sun and not vice versa, is another example.

But even apart from the question of infallibility, it is totally unreasonable, and against all rules of psychology, to demand that someone "give assent" to a teaching that is judged by an individual as being contrary to right reason. The seeking of truth is a function of the intellect; giving assent is a function of the will, and involves choice. If one is forced to "assent" to something that the intellect sees as false or untenable, violence is done not only to man's intelligence (brainwashing) but to his free will as well (involuntary servitude). The claim to infallibility must be dropped (and repented) before any real progress can be made in dialogue with other denominations, not to mention dialogue within the ranks of the Church itself.

One could go on and on about the implications of identifying the Genesis narrative as allegory. But, as a matter of fact, theologians will agree that we can know the truths of our faith, about God, the after-life, Heaven, Hell, Purgatory and the like, ONLY by way of analogy. In John's Gospel we read, "No one has seen God. It is God the only Son, ever at his Father's side, who has revealed him." Again the question keeps asserting itself. Is Jesus really the only-begotten son of God? Or is this yet another allegory, based on a previous allegory, and an adaptation of the mythical "sons-of-the-gods" stories of the Christians' pagan neighbors? Whatever it is, wherever the truth lies, we

must not throw out the baby with the bath-water! We need to be attentive to recognizing allegories for what they are, glean the truths that they are meant to teach, and refrain from insisting that the subject of the allegory is a literally factual person that once existed or a factual event that actually happened.