

The Long and Winding Road

The Setting

Almost two thousand years ago, in the Mediterranean world around modern Egypt, a sermon was written. The sermon has made it into the Christian Bible in a “book” called “Hebrews.” The sermon starts with a provocative statement.

Over and over, in different ways, long ago, God spoke to the fathers through the prophets. But in these latter days, he has spoken to us through his Son (Heb. 1:1).¹

One God, one message, but different methods. Seeing that God’s message to humanity in the “latter days” of the writer was given in Jesus, allows us to go back into the days “long ago” to find that same message.

That is the point of this series. I will walk through many examples of God speaking the message found in Jesus through prophets that walked the earth in the millennia before Jesus. The journey will feature a myriad of ways God spoke his message. Sometimes, the wording was direct. Often it was in images and types. In the many different ways, we have the blessing of hindsight, illuminating the message by knowing its ultimate form in Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

The Beginning

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth (Gen. 1:1).

In the beginning, God already existed. A plural form for “God” in the Hebrew language (*elohim*), which would normally be translated “Gods,” yet is clearly intended singular, taking a singular verb. One God – yet in some way understood as a plural. Was this simply error on the part of the prophet writers? Was their grammar that far off? Of course not. The writing isn’t an error. It is intentional.

Perhaps, some skeptics reason, this was a latent result of an early polytheistic belief in multiple gods, hitting a transition stage where monotheism (a belief in one God) was taking hold. Again, this isn’t the claim of the prophets. The prophets had no reason not to be plain in their speech. If indeed they were prophets, they were speaking as the voice of another, as the voice of God. This was a deliberate statement that will inform the story as one works through history.

¹ Unless indicated otherwise, the translations in this series are my own.

God set about creating this universe, the cosmos and all that is in it. The prophet is beginning a story with nothing but God and building out from there. Nothing indicates that God is creating haphazardly. God is creating with a purpose. There is a goal in mind.

The next few words set up the plan of God's creation.

And the earth was formless and void (Gen. 1:2).

This verse sets the course for what is to come. God's creation will be marked by two types of work. He will form what he wishes to form, and then he will fill what he has formed. Each time God does so, he does so with his word. God speaks the forms into existence, and fills them with his word too.

It happens in "days" or "periods." The first three days, God forms. The second three days he fills what he formed. Then there is a seventh day. The days align quite beautifully.

- The first day of "forming" (day "one"), God forms light, separating it from darkness. The first day of "filling" (day "four"), God fills the light he formed with the sun to rule the day and the moon and stars to rule the night.
- The second day of forming (day two), God forms the atmosphere and the seas. The second day of filling (day five), God fills the air with birds and the seas with all sorts of creatures. With God's blessings, they are made to reproduce, to grow, and develop.
- The third day of forming (day three), God forms the land masses in the midst of the seas, complete with vegetation that will reproduce. The third day of filling (day six), God fills the land with all sorts of creatures, large and small.

This work, the prophet explains, was "good," but God wasn't done. This one God in plural form has a self-dialogue! The prophet wrote,

And he (God) said, "Let us make people [*adam* in the Hebrew means "man" but also simply "people" or "humanity"] in our image, our likeness." (Gen. 1:26).

The plan was to give humanity a dominion, not over God nor equivalent with God, but over the other living beings on earth as well as the earth itself. So, God made people, "male and female," in his image.

Something unique and profound happened. Everything else God made was blessed and good, but with humanity, we see something deliberately in sync with God himself. This is worthy of greater attention and focus, and the prophet gives it in the next story. But first

the prophet draws this creation to a close with the resting of God, as God declares the seventh day a day of rest. All the forming and all the filling was done. Now for the closer look at God making humanity.

A Closer Look

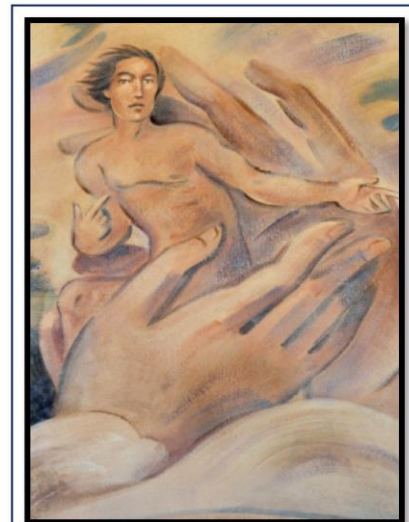
In recounting the closer look at the making of humanity, the prophet moves from simply calling God by the title, “God.” The prophet uses God’s actual name, as it will be given to Moses many generations hence. The name is “YHWH.” Those four English letters represent the Hebrew letters of יהוה. The name is holy, and not to be taken lightly! Many Jews won’t even pronounce it. Scripture often abbreviates it in form as simply יה or ך. The prophet now gives personal definition to God as he begins to describe the personal interactions between man and God.

God took land that had no life at all. The land was desolate and without even the slightest hint of vegetation. From that dry and dusty, lifeless dirt, God “formed” a male human. God then “filled” the human he formed. God breathed into the man, God’s living breath. With this filling, the man became alive! God’s breath alone filled man with life. There was no life in the dusty ground from which he was formed. This becomes an important part of God’s message.

God planted a beautiful garden giving the man a perfect place to live. God gave the man a job to do. The man was to keep the garden, enjoy its bounty, and live in an intimate relationship with his creator God.

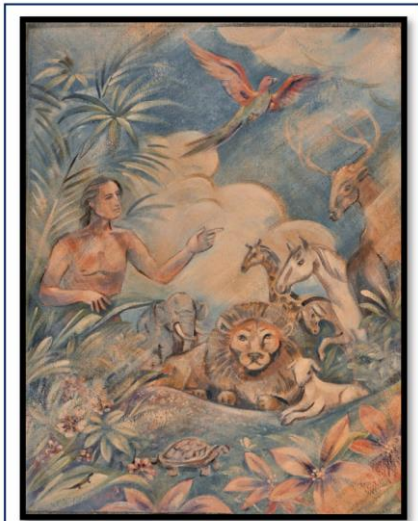
The prophet already explained that, by design, the man was made in God’s image, but that didn’t make the man God. God explained clearly to the man that he had limits. He had to live under God’s authority. The man was given this rule through the presence of a tree, “the tree of knowledge of good and evil” (Gen. 2:17). If the man made the deliberate choice and disobeyed God, eating of the tree, then the man would die. His life would be over.

This might seem harsh, but it is the word of the prophet. It is the truthful reality that man’s existence with God is dependent on man living as he was made. Man was made in God’s image, and his life was God’s breath. As an image bearer of God, man is no mere machine. He is not a puppet with strings pulled by God. Man is a real being with an ability to make real choices. If those choices align with God, then man continues to live his godly life. If those choices rebel against God, then the resolution of rebellion is death.



YHWH God formed man
from dusty ground (Gen. 2:7)

This isn't an arbitrary matter. It is a fact, a rule or reality. God existed before creation. He is who he is. He always has been and ever will be an unchanging being, fully relational and complete. God chose to make a humanity that could also choose. This humanity could choose to walk as created, reflecting God and enjoying fellowship with him, or humanity could choose rebellion. But the rule is simple: just as putting your hand in fire will burn your flesh, so rebelling (aka "sinning") against God will remove you from his intimacy. His breath is life, and without it, there is death.



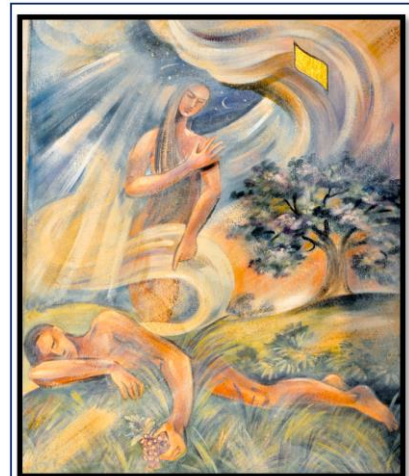
The man gave names to all
(Gen. 2:20)

All was okay, for a time. Man, the image bearer of God went about his work reflecting God, albeit on a smaller scale! In the beginning, God gave names to the sun and stars and all he created. In the Garden of Eden, where man was placed, it was man who gave names to all the creatures God made. Whatever the man named the creature, that was the creature's name.

In the midst of this work, it was apparent to the man that even though these living creatures were diverse and created by God, none of them were soul mates or intimate companion quality. None of them reached a fellowship level for the man filled with God's spirit and made in God's image.

Therefore, God went to work again. Giving Adam a deep sleep, God created the woman of Adam's dreams! This woman was like Adam who was like God. She also contained God's image, and the two had the blessings of their creator. They were satisfied just as they were made. There was no guilt or shame, and nothing needed covering up. Their life was set!

Therefore, God went to work again. Giving Adam a deep



YHWH God made the rib of the man into a woman (Gen. 2:22)

The Enemy

The prophet then explained that Adam and Eve were not alone in the garden. There was a tempter, the crafty serpent. Part of having the image of God includes an ability to make

choices. God chose to make the universe. God chose to make humans. Similarly, humans are able to make choices. Some choices include what names to give to animals. That was fair game to the man. God declared that whatever names the man chose, was what the name would be. But there were limits to what man could choose if man wanted to be obedient. This again points back to the tree.

There was no fuzzy misunderstanding. It was clear what obedience meant. The man and the woman were to do as God said, and avoid eating from the single tree set up as their boundary on life. God didn't make machines. He didn't program humanity to dictate their actions. Life is not so simple or meaningless. People are real and significant, with great ability to do good things or bad things.

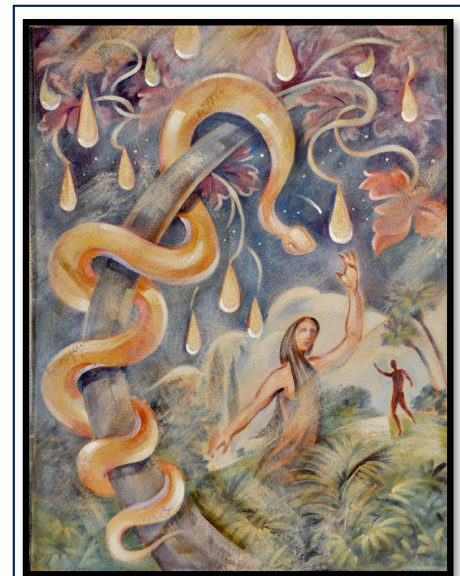
Into this freedom to choose slithered the deceptive serpent. Finding the woman, the serpent begins a subtle deception, leaving out the personal nature of God found in his name, and simply referencing his title, "Did God actually say don't eat of *any* tree in the garden?" The woman answered, "We can eat of the fruit of the trees, except for the one tree in the middle. We're not even allowed to touch it or we *might* die."

The woman got the command wrong, but imperfect knowledge was no sin. The sin came shortly afterwards, rebellion rooted in pride and selfishness. The serpent countered the idea of dying, suggesting instead that the woman and man would become fully God. By experiencing good and evil, the couple would know good and evil. They would never again have to rely upon God to teach or tell them such things.

The woman gazed on the tree, and entranced by its beauty, picked a fruit from the tree and ate it. This wasn't a solo rebellion. She had her husband with her. He took the fruit from her hand and tasted it as well.

The change was immediate. For the first time in their lives, they were ashamed and acutely self-conscious of their nakedness. They did their best making makeshift clothing from fig leaves.

In telling the story, the prophet brings back the name of God explaining that YHWH God was walking in the garden to fellowship with the couple, calling for them. The couple hid, out of fear, shame, and embarrassment. Unable to hide from God, like Socrates millennia later, God began to teach the couple through questioning.



The serpent was more crafty than all the animals (Gen. 3:1)

God asked the man where he was. The man began justifying himself for hiding, explaining he was naked and couldn't just be out in the open. It is absurd to think about, really, but the man whose body had been made by God, was embarrassed to be seen by that God. God pressed with more questions, revealing the real problem.

God asked who had told the man he was naked. With no answer given, God then asked whether the man had rebelled and eaten the forbidden fruit. The man acknowledged eating, but in the same breath blamed the woman, adding that God made her and gave her to the man. In a real sense, the man had the audacity to blame God in the final sense.

Like many over the millennia sense, it seemed logical and exculpatory to say, "Well, if God is so good, why did he make people where they could sin?" Of course, even a moment's thinking about this puts it into the category of asking if God can do anything, can he make a rock so big he can't lift it. It is an impossible question rooted in illogic. God made people in his image, able to choose. It doesn't follow that God could make humans in his image and make them unable to choose. They wouldn't be humans.

Having heard the deflection from the man, God turned his cross-examination to the woman, asking her to explain herself. The woman grabbed a page from her husband's playbook, and blaming the serpent.

The Problem

The story sets up the cosmic problem of humanity. People were made in God's image. They are hard-wired with his morality and with a longing to be in relationship with him. That is the purpose behind their creation. Life with God that is transparent and open. One of intimate fellowship, unashamed, with nothing hidden.

With loving care, God made people fit for a relationship with him. It is the purpose of life, and without it, humanity lives without fulfillment. There is an emptiness, a calling that, "There must be more to life." Some are more sensitive to the vacuum than others. Some try to find fulfillment in money, power, sexual experience, drugs or alcohol, food, work, popularity, philosophy and learning, or some other attempt for meaning. But in the end, there is still a hole seeking to be filled.

God could have easily washed his hands of things then and there. God could have annihilated the man and woman and started all over. God could have considered them a rogue experiment gone bad. But not God. God hadn't quit loving them nor desiring a relationship with them. However, there was a real problem. A very real problem. Humanity was sinful. Sin is evil and cannot be a part of the perfect God. An analogy used later in the Bible is that of light and darkness. God is pure light. Darkness can't exist in the presence of light. Where light shines, darkness is destroyed.

One might think the answer is for God to change. Maybe God could be some light and some darkness. But that isn't God. God is unchanging. Furthermore, God is just and a keeper of his word. When the man and woman rebelled, and ate the forbidden fruit, it required the just God to punish them as he had said. Once they embraced the darkness, they were dead to the light.

The relational YHWH God, was the judge. He gathered the couple and the serpent and pronounced their sentences. The man and woman were banished from the garden where the food was bountiful, God's presence was immediate, and their relationship was easy. The woman was in for a rough time in child birth. The man, now "Adam" (the Hebrew drops the article so that the Hebrew word *adam* no longer simply means "man," but is now a name) no longer held dominion over creation. Adam was now subject to it. He was going to have to gather food by the sweat of his brow, toiling among thorns and thistles. Additionally, the husband and wife were going to have difficulties in their relationships. As for the serpent, he was cursed, and was going to be at odds with humanity from then on.



YHWH God banished man from the garden to sweat among thorns and thistles working the ground (Gen. 2:7)

God wouldn't let the couple eat of the tree of life lest they live forever in their state of death. He ejected them from the garden and set up an angelic sentry to see that they didn't try to return.

The Prophet's Message

In this accounting, there is the beginning of God's message. The message sets out the problem of a just God coming to grips with sinful humanity. There are layers of indication that God is not done with humanity. God has a plan. The glimpse into his plan are seen in his proclamations to the serpent as well as his actions with the man and woman.

God tells the serpent that one who descends from the woman will one day crush the deceiver and his work. This will come at a personal price, as the serpent will be able to harm the one coming, but to no avail. The offspring will be the victor.

At this point, Adam gives one last name out. He names his wife "Eve," from an old Hebrew form for "life," because future life would be coming from Eve, both immediately by having children, and at some point in the future through her offspring.

Another glimpse into God's coming salvation for the man and woman occurs before he has them depart the garden. God makes them clothing from animal skins. This is a magnificent metaphor the prophet gives. An animal sacrifice occurs to cover up the nakedness that symbolized the sinful shame and guilt of Adam and Eve. This is a foretaste of what God will do when the time is right. Righteous clothing will come for humanity secured by God through the sacrifice of his Son.

But this story has a long way to go first...

Points for Home

1. *“And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done...Though they know God's righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them”* (Rom. 1:28, 32 ESV).

Sin is a very real problem that must have a solution. Darkness cannot be in the presence of light. Sin is darkness. Either God must bring light to us, or we are destined for death. The Biblical problem has a solution. God's mercy can triumph, even in the face of his judgment. But it takes an act of God and acceptance of people. Left to ourselves, we have a bleak future of sin and death.

2. *“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love, he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth”* (Eph. 1:3-10 ESV).

Paul's message here is profound. He explains that the omniscient God didn't embark blindly upon creation. God knew what would happen before he made people with choice. Yet God also knew the answer. God committed himself to the path of redemption before he ever made you and me. He didn't make us to be imperfect. He made us for the kind of perfection that allows the relationship between us and him for eternity. He redeemed humanity from the sin through Jesus. The message in final form! The mystery revealed!