

# GENESIS 1

BY

THE AMAIC EXECUTIVE

## A. Nature of God's Creative Act

In the first chapter of his Letter to the Romans, St. Paul takes serious issue with the leading thinkers of his days amongst the pagans, those who love to call themselves 'philosophers' and who liked to be considered as such by their contemporaries.

In part of his letter [Rom. 1:20] he says:-

*Ever since the creation of the world His invisible nature, namely, His eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse*

**These weighty words lie at the foundation of this article.**

Under the direct inspiration of the Holy Spirit St. Paul categorically states that, with some effort in clear thinking, human beings can ascertain accurately and truthfully the attributes that pertain to the Divine Nature of God. This study of God without the Divine Revelation in Christ and carried out from natural sources is done in that part of Philosophy which goes under the name of *Theodicy*. This word has a Greek root, Θεος δικαιοω, which means 'to think right about God'; to 'justify' or 'vindicate' God. The stern tone adopted by St. Paul in this part of his Letter to the Romans culminates in a stinging condemnation. It shows (and we are entitled to borrow a phrase here that was used so often by the Hebrew Prophets of Old: "it is the Lord Who speaks") that the neglect of this vital study is considered by God to be a grave insult of the Divine Majesty, which has the most dire repercussions on those who have been given by God the mind to undertake such study, but who, out of contempt for God, refuse to do it.

If a handbook of *Theodicy* (also called 'Natural Theology') is consulted as a subsection within the whole ambit of the Thomistic Philosophy (in which according to numerous papal documents the Catholic Church feels completely at home), one can find out for oneself which attributes of the Divine Nature can be ascertained by man from the study of created things.

First and foremost, the existence of God can be proved.

Then the mode of His existence can be ascertained;

- that He exists from no one;
- that He exists from all eternity, outside time, with no beginning and no end;
- that His existence is immutable and indivisible, with no past or future;
- that God is One, and that His existence is infinite perfection.

As for God's action, it can be found that God is omnipotent; and

- that His actions are in total conformity with His Divine Nature; and
- that His flawless Holiness must be worshipped by those of His creatures to whom He gave reason.

Etc., etc.

That it is not out of place to refer here to the dire consequences St. Paul mentions in the first chapter of his Letter to the Romans can be seen from the following fact. A few years ago a lecturer at the Ballarat campus of the so-called ‘catholic’ university of Australia declared in a “Lenten” lecture attended by priests, religious and lay people: “*now we know more about the spiritual life than Christ*”. Not even a murmur of protest from the priests and religious present greeted this bombshell .... Not only was this outrage duly reported to the highest Church authorities in this country without any effect, but the man is now a Ph.D.! To show what meaning this ‘title’ has under such circumstances, we borrow one of St. Paul’s observations found in the already quoted first chapter of his Letter to the Romans and put it in the modern vernacular: “*The more they called themselves doctors of philosophy, the more stupid they became*” (v. 22).

Philosophical truths, derived from the seen and unseen, from the created and the uncreated reality by means of the “Philosophia Perennis”, that is the “Everlasting Philosophy”, are transcendental and immutable. This means that they are always and everywhere true, and must be given full assent by the human mind, because on these truths rests God’s veracity in Revelation. St. Paul would never have been so stinging in his condemnation of the *erroneous* heathen philosophy of his day had it not been for his first hand experience of the impossibility of building divine Revelation on that foundation. The truths of Revelation will *never* clash with truths already ascertained by the human mind according to these profound words spoken to the whole Church by *Pope PIUS XII* in “*Humani Generis*”:

**And so, if reason is to perform this office adequately and without fear of error, it must be trained on the right principles. It must be steeped in that sound philosophy which we have long possessed as an heirloom handed down to us by former ages of Christendom. These principles on which it is based have been made by the teaching Authority of the Church into the touchstone of Divine Revelation.**

Strong words, making a philosophical system “*the touchstone of Divine Revelation*”. But that the Holy Father is adamant about this is made very clear from what he says next:-

**The mind of man when it is engaged in a sincere search for truths, will never light on one which contradicts the truths already ascertained. The Christian will weigh the latest fantasy carefully, making sure that he does not lose hold of the truth already in his possession, or contaminate it in any way with great danger and perhaps great loss of the Faith itself.**

It is from the knowledge of the above-mentioned attributes in the Divine Nature *ascertained* in true philosophy that a study must be undertaken of the creative act of God. The results of this study must be in complete harmony with what the human mind can know about God. When the Holy Spirit revealed in the first sentence of the first chapter of Genesis “*that God created heaven and earth*”, the Hebrew bible uses the word בָּרָא “*bara*” for “*created*”. Now it is inconceivable that the *inspired* use of this verb for the creative act of God can be given a meaning which is at variance with what the human mind according to St. Paul *can* know and *must* know of the Divine Nature. If we go by the well-established principle in Philosophy that “*agere sequitur esse*”, which means that every being can act only according to its nature, then, applying this to the Divine Being we must hold that the acts of God bear the stamp of His Divine Nature. A clash between the actions of God and the Nature of God

would force the human mind *to lose hold of a truth already in its possession* or would *contaminate it in any way*. The rock-bottom guarantee that such a clash would never occur lies with the One Who inspired the use of the word ‘*bara*’: the Holy Spirit Himself. Thus the creative act of God, the Hebrew ‘*bara*’, must be weighed against the Truths which the “*Philosophia Perennis*” has already ascertained about the Divine Nature. For these truths have been made by the teaching Authority of the Church into “*the touchstone of Divine Revelation*”.

Thus, if the Nature of God is indivisible, not allowing for past, present and future, and if its action “*ad extra*”, i.e. outside Himself, like creation, follows from His Nature, then we can **not** attribute to that Divine Action what cannot be attributed to His Divine Nature.

So, what meaning must then be given to the Hebrew word “*bara*”?

Holy Scripture is first and foremost its own interpreter. This means that, if some-thing is not immediately clear in one part of the Bible, then its meaning can be uncovered in another place. Applying this principle to the creative act of God, we find in the Vulgate rendering of Ecclesiasticus (Sirach) 18:1 the necessary light we need for the illumination of the Hebrew word “*bara*”.

*Qui vivit in æternum creavit omnia simul.*

*“He who lives in eternity created all things at once, or simultaneously”.*

This is in total agreement with what Philosophy has uncovered about the *unity* between the Divine Nature and the Divine Action. St. Augustine must have come across this text when he wrote that God created “*omnia simul*”, all at once, *with time* but **not in time**. St. Thomas teaches the same doctrine. To him creation must be seen as instantaneous.

Not to be considered as an instant “*which links past with future*”, (i.e. creation is not an instant *in time*, but *outside time*), but is created *with time* (De Pot. 3, 3, c and S.Th. I, 45, 2 ad 3). These great minds knew their Philosophy. They knew that there is no clash between what the human mind can discover about God in its own light, in the “*philosophia perennis*”, and what it sees in the Light of Revelation. And so they lived, and taught us to live, with that great paradox: that the whole world, from beginning to end, was created instantaneously, the ‘*omnia simul*’ of Sacred Scripture, but also as a development in time. It may be necessary to remind the readers here that a *paradox* is only an *apparent* contradiction, and is something that hides a very deep truth.

*What are the elements of this paradox?*

1. That God created, בָּרָא, “*bara*”, the whole history of mankind. He had selected “*omnia simul*”, all at once, instantaneously, outside time, and with no link of past with future. The whole of creation lies as an open book before Him in His ‘present’.

2. That *with time* this instantaneous creation was created as a development, as a history, known by humans as linking past with future by means of the present.

That this is not an easy concept to grasp is borne out by the fact that people have difficulty conceiving together the fact that (if we restrict ourselves here only to human beings) all created souls outside time are in the presence of God but appear in time one after the other. The minute we think of those souls as having *outside time* an unbodily existence, waiting for their moment in time to be united with their appropriate body, is attributing to God the equivalent of a *successive creation* which *outside time* would link past with the future in the Divine ‘present’, *now*, which is impossible. In fact this type of thinking would attribute to God Himself *past, present and future* by extending this succession into the eternal *now*.

*So what is the solution?*

The deep truth we talked about above, which this paradox - this seeming contradiction - holds, lies in the miracle of the *one* Divine creative act whereby any created being and every one of his myriad acts: his conception, birth and death, and all the acts in between, marvellously coincide *in time* with the “omnia simul” *outside time*. With this, *succession* is restricted only to the history developing *in time with time*, and is not extended where it has no meaning, i.e. in the eternal *now*. It is quite ‘natural’, though erroneous, for a younger brother to consider himself created later in time than his elder brother. The fact is that he only *appears* later in the human succession developing *in time and with time*. But his later appearance says nothing about his participation in the “omnia simul” which would attribute succession to the “omnia simul”, the Divine Act, which is not only inadmissible but impossible. God would not be perfect if He still had a future, and if He, like all human beings, had to ‘wait’ for that future to come along.

*What must be said then about the biblical “Six Days of Creation”?*

The first thing that must be noticed about this is that the sacred author, for the description of the “six days”, uses other Hebrew verbs for what is going on there, which are different from “*bara*”. The words chosen are אָמַר and עָשָׂה.

The first one, “*amar*”, is the usual Hebrew word for “*to speak*”, and the second one, “*asah*”, is the usual Hebrew word for “*doing something*”. So obviously, the author of this part of Genesis is at pains to tell us that God was **not** creating in the Six Days. The Divine Act of creation, “*bara*”, had already taken place.

Even if only from experience, human beings must admit that God’s divine act of creation borders on the infinite. To us it appears as an incredibly complex enterprise. And if the human free will with the almost endless actualisations it contains is taken into consideration, the mind simply spins. It seems impossible to take it all in.

We know from sacred Scripture that God walked with Adam and Eve in paradise in the cool of the evening. What better chance than this was there then for God to *speak* about the details contained in the single act of creation! There He explained to them about what He had *done*. Just as Our Blessed Lord *explained* the things He had *done* while walking with the two disciples on the way to Emmaus after He had *re-created man in His own image and likeness*. So God explained to Adam and Eve about cattle, and fish, and plants and trees, and sun and moon. And how they themselves had been formed from dust in special creation. And thus it came about that the marvellous tableaux were shown to our first parents in their state of original innocence, breaking down for them what was contained in the single act of God’s creation.

Or viewed somewhat differently, God wrote down on tablets, as in a book, all the marvellous details of what was contained in the single act of creation, and thus arranged the book in order. Just as many centuries later He would write on tablets all that Moses had been instructed to tell the sons of Israel. And when He had finished speaking and writing, detailing and arranging ‘the first library’, God rested on the seventh day; not for Himself, but for us. Yes, the human race had a lot to learn after it had been created ....! Just as it had a lot to learn after it had been *re-created*.

## B. Genesis 1 as a Book

The Book of Genesis is comprised of a series of family histories (Hebrew *tôledôt*: תולדות) of the great patriarchs, from Adam to Joseph.

Genesis therefore is made up of a series of books, or diaries; the first of which covers verses 1:1-2:4 and is called *The Book of the Heavens and the Earth*; the title being taken from its opening line: “*In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth*” (1:1). The Septuagint in fact tells us that this section of Genesis was a written account, or book (Hebrew *sêpher*: סֵפֶר): “*God made the written account of the origin of the heavens and the earth*”. In other words, God was not creating (בְּרָא) the universe during those Six Days. He had already done that in the beginning, *all at once*. That is why Exodus 20:11 and 31:17, when referring to God’s activity during the Six Days, do not once use the Hebrew word for create (*bara*), but use the far more flexible in meaning, *asah*. (See ‘The Nature of God’s Creative Act’ above).

What God apparently *was* doing was writing a book for an already existing Adam and Eve. It was like a day-class with God as Teacher. The Almighty was doing what He would later do on Mount Sinai, in the presence of Moses: making a revelation and writing down on tablets what He wanted to be preserved in perpetuity, engraved in stone.

### *Two Approaches to Genesis 1*

Regarding the meaning of the ‘Six Days’ (Gk. *Hexaëmeron*), debate has tended to divide commentators into two camps, namely:

(a) Those who favour the view that the world was created during six real, 24-hour days. This is often referred to as the *literalist* approach, because the Hebrew word for ‘day’ (*yom*) is taken in its literal meaning of a 24-hour day;

(b) Those who favour an *allegorical* interpretation, e.g. the ‘theistic’ evolutionists, who might argue, for instance, that the ‘Six Days’ could refer allegorically to geological periods of millions of years. Or some other such non-literal interpretation.

There is no doubt that by far the majority of the Fathers favoured the so-called *literalist* interpretation of the *Hexaëmeron*. We can name here such luminaries as Sts. Basil, Jerome, Chrysostom, Ephrem. (The Syro-Arabic, Jewish and Persian commentators also definitely favoured the view that God created the world during Six Days).

But not all the Fathers of the Church accepted this interpretation.

The famous Alexandrian School, which included of course St. Clement, and the erudite Origen, preferred a more allegorical approach - which, however, needs to be distinguished from that of the ‘theistic’ evolutionists. Origen ridiculed the notion of a creation that lasted during six days. And even the proponents of this approach have to concede that there are significant problems with it, for example:

(a) How could there be “*evenings*” and “*mornings*” on the first three days if the sun was not created until the fourth day?

(b) Why would Almighty God need to cease from His work because of the turning of the world on its axis?

Etc.

Not to mention the metaphysical difficulty discussed above of how God's creative act could have had temporal duration; directly in conflict, it seems, with the quotation from Sirach 18:1. *Omnia simul*, God created all things **at once!**

The fact that the so-called *literalist* approach has not been fully able to deal with all the contingencies of the Genesis text - despite the weight behind it of so many Church Fathers (amongst whom, it should be noted, there was nevertheless great variety of interpretation) - could lead us to conclude that in this case there may be need to, as Pope Leo XIII said, go "*beyond*" the Fathers [in *Providentissimus Deus*, 1893, II, C, d. Emphasis added]:

*But [the expositor of the Bible] must not on that account [i.e., of duty to "follow the footsteps" of the Fathers "with all reverence", # c.] consider that it is forbidden, when just cause exists, to push inquiry and exposition beyond what the Fathers have done; provided he carefully observes the rule so wisely laid down by St. Augustine - not to depart from the literal and obvious sense, except only where reason makes it untenable or necessity requires [De. Gen ad Litt., viii, 7, 13]; a rule to which it is more necessary to adhere strictly in these times, when the thirst for novelty and unrestrained freedom of thought make the danger of error most real and proximate.*

Turning now from the *literalist* to the *allegorical* approach, we can say that well-known from 'creationist' literature are the problems encountered by the 'theistic' evolutionists and others. As said above, the Hebrew word *yom* is clearly pointing to a 24-hour day, which fact Genesis 1 reinforces by adding "*evenings*" and "*mornings*". But the evolutionist approach cannot come to grips with - account for - any of this.

## The Solution

As is often the case, the solution may be found in *via media*, in the middle way. This was often St. Thomas Aquinas' approach, of looking at two opposite points of view, taking what was true from each, purifying it of whatever rubbish, and attaining true synthesis. Certainly there is merit in some of the things that both sides have put forward. But, insofar as they have generally insisted that Genesis 1 is about the *duration* of God's work of creation, they have all been barking up the wrong tree. The Bible and the Church's *omnia simul* tells us that there was no duration because *God is outside time*.

As St. Augustine rightly perceived, Genesis is a *revelation*, by the Creator to the creature, of His works of creation already completed.

And Sts. Thomas and Albert the Great thought that Augustine's view here was the best of all interpretations of the text. Apparently, therefore, God was the direct author of Genesis 1, and it was He who "*finished*" (Genesis 2:1) writing the series of tablets - not "*finished*" the creation of the universe, as is often thought - just as later He "*finished*" (Exodus 31:18) the "*two tablets*" that He gave to Moses on Mount Sinai.

One usually finds that the proponents of the *literalist* interpretation of Genesis 1 are not all that literal. And the problem is their general ignorance of the Hebrew language. They get right the meaning of the Hebrew word, *yom*, as a 24-hour day. But, because they cannot cope with the precise meaning of the other important Hebrew words used in the text, they come up with the theory that God was creating the universe over six such days.