

What About the Old Testament?

by

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Few subjects are more difficult for us to relate to than the stories in the Old Testament. Traditionally these images are presented during religious instruction and thereby come, at least partially, with a belief system. This may create difficulties for teachers. For is it part of our religious life to believe in a creation story? Or in the fall of man? Or in Jonah and the whale? Or that Abraham, in order to please the Lord, was willing to stick the sacrificial knife into Isaac?

These portrayals are powerful and sometimes frightening. And even though one occasionally finds lovely stories in the Old Testament, all too often even these are over-laced with unreasonable and unsavory elements. Whether we are guided by religious feelings or we look at the events in light of scientific inquiry—both methods are equally inadequate in helping a teacher get hold of the content that he or she must truly bring to the children in the classroom.

Many have tried to solve the problem quietly by cutting out the most alarming parts of the Old Testament, but censoring the text is not feasible. If our goal is to trace human consciousness back to the common origin, no other story comes near the Jewish tradition. The idea of common roots is significant for all of us and for all children.

These reflections may be weighed up one at a time, but the question remains: What do you do with the Old Testament in the Waldorf school? Rudolf Steiner wanted lessons taught from the Old Testament, preferably in the third grade. He was convinced that this material presents strongly formed pictures that speak to the age appropriate development children. It should be presented in a universal context and not as religious instruction.

The Israelites were commanded never to make a visible picture of God. Instead a powerful pictorial force is found in their language. The Old Testament speaks with strong pathos that our children can feel. When the teacher truly represents what he brings in the lessons, these stories can reach a part of life for the children that fairy tales and legends can not reach.

Those who have taught in the third grade a number of times may have noticed that children pass through a small threshold at that age. In the first two school years the teacher often feels that children follow him on “invisible strings.” He belongs to them and they belong to him. In a sense the children swallow the words spoken by the teacher. Once a child came to a teacher at the Waldorf school and said, “You know what, Teacher? I dreamed last night that I ate you up.” The teacher was not upset but rightfully enthusiastic.

In the third grade the children no longer “swallow” the teacher’s words. They are more critical. “Who are you?” they ask. “Are you always correct? Will you always decide over me?” The threshold is not severe, but there is more distance, not only to the teacher but also to everyone else in the child’s life. A pseudo-estrangement occurs. The teacher becomes just one of the teachers and the parents become just people among other people.

The continuous and underlying theme of the Old Testament is a similar estrangement, but it appears between people and God. The people in the *Bible* lived under the pressure of God who commanded strictly, “You shall and you shall not!” We are aware of an almighty, invisible power as God’s fingers write the universal laws!

Now that the children no longer live so closely to their teacher, the question arises—there must be something all mighty, something beyond the teacher and humanity! What is that? This question cannot be answered with traditional, biblical history instruction. It must become pedagogically active in the child’s life. That is when a selection of Old Testament stories can be effective. We are back to the challenge for modern teachers: How do I truly represent the *Bible* stories?

The first thing we learn in the *Bible* is that the world was created:

BERESHIT BARA ELOHIM ETH HASHAMAJIM VETH HAREZ

which is customarily translated: “In the beginning God created Heaven and Earth.” Steiner pointed out that much more is said with these words than can be expressed in modern language.¹ Bara that is translated with the word created could be expressed in the dictionary by a number of other words: produced, yielded, or generated. It is just a choice of words but the mental image generated by the word Bara in the Old Testament created an immediate experience of picture-sound and sound-quality in the language. A lively, imaginative process was thereby generated in the human soul. Such a sentence was true for ancient people. Therefore they did not need any proof.

What about those of us who are trained in abstract concepts that do not give us any picture-sound experience? Can we, with a good conscience, tell the

children how the world was created? How can we convey to our children that God brought forth the whole visible world of nature?

Many of us were taught that God did not create the world, it created itself. The world and everything alive was created by its own inherent force. Let us use a parable. Two friends sit and listen to a violinist. When the concert is over they begin to discuss from where the music came. One of them is a materialist. He explains how the music is created physically, when the bow strikes the strings, the strings vibrate, the sounding board gives resonance, and so forth. Nothing in this argument can be opposed. But the other friend is not satisfied. He says: You are forgetting the composer! Without the composer we have no music no matter what acoustic principles are used. They cannot agree. Music is created in the violin, says one. It comes from the composer answers the other. Who is right?

We see that they are talking about two different things. One truth does not negate the other. In modern science we often speak of complementary truths. Can we consider the creation story in the *Bible* a complementary truth? We should at least consider this. It is true that the *Bible* stories are told in pictures and written in a language that is from our sensory world. It could not be different. But it is also a reality that the *Bible* tells of a creation that takes place in a pre-earthly realm. Therefore, we can partially understand the pictures as borrowed from the invisible world. The teacher needs to find possibilities for presenting the pictures and occurrences so that the unreasonable aspects fade into the background and the meaningful perspectives become accessible for the children.

First let us approach the creation stories and the occurrences in Paradise. *Para dies*, from the Latin meaning “over the day,” suggests a direction. We are challenged to look back to a cosmic, embryonic condition in which the world and the human being were yet unborn. Just as it is hard to understand an embryo through the mental images you use to comprehend an adult, so is it difficult to understand the story of Paradise with mental images based on our daily cognition. Steiner indicated the relationship between his interpretation of the creation and the *Bible's* creation story as follows:

We must imagine that at the Earth's beginning neither man nor animals existed but something more undifferentiated. At first the creatures materialize that become the animal kingdom. The human being remains behind in a pre-created condition, still within the Being of God. The human being must wait until it can receive the form it shall have. If you try to envision this you can say: In the form the human being later receives it has forced the animal kingdom out and down to the Earth. When the conditions are right for the human being to develop its soul, then does he first appear in physical form. If you understand these relationships you will again find the deepest respect for religious documents that are not otherwise easy to relate to.”²

There is no lack of mythical-legendary content in the history of the Jewish people. This content can be understood as windows into the room that lies behind. Through those windows a spiritual light falls on earthly events. It is not always easy to decide what must be understood naturalistically and what must be given a symbolic, imaginative meaning.

In the story of the fall of man the interpretation is decisive. The fall of man results in mankind entering onto the Earth. We can also say that the human being received an entirely different consciousness. And how is that? From the context we can understand that the human being in Paradise has not discovered himself, has no idea about his own existence. The human being in Paradise is one with all life. The pair of humans is one, all are one. “Man-woman was created by Him” is the text, not “man and woman,” as it is often translated so we can better understand! In Paradise there is no death; death only exists on Earth. When humans become earthly and individualized, they can die.

When humans first eat from the tree of knowledge, they discover themselves—“their eyes were opened.” They become aware of their existence, their “nakedness.” Therefore it is said that humans in the beginning were self-less creatures, mirror images of the creators. (I use the plural because in *Moses, Book I* the plural is used for Elohim.)

From another side a being appears called the “snake.” The snake tells the humans: “Eat, so you will be like God and know the difference between good and evil.” An enormous paradox lies in these words. To be like God, free of sin, should that be wrong? Is that not for what all good people strive? Theologians have tried to loosen the knot by saying: It was a challenge to disobedience. But that gives us no explanation as to why it was prohibited to help one’s self to the tree of knowledge. An important question is left unanswered: What is inside a human being that can differentiate between good and evil?

Our first answer can be conscience, or, more precisely, the self that whispers to my conscience. On the Earth there is only one creation that can say to itself: I am! It is the human being. Steiner pointed to another place in the Old Testament that sheds light on this answer: when Moses received the task of leading Israel out of Egypt. He stands before a burning thorn bush and asks: “Who shall I say has sent me, what is his name?” Then God said to Moses: “I am who I am! (*Eje asher eje*—I am the I!) Tell the children of Israel I am has sent you. That is my eternal name, my memory from generation to generation.” (*Book of Moses* 3. 13–15)

Here is named the godly character of the human being before the tempter intervened. The fall of man means that consciousness of the Self was anticipated; it was an early birth. “The eyes of man were opened,” the senses were engaged,

and they became so comprehend the world. But desire of Adam and Eve was also ignited. The conscience Self was overpowered by the egotistical ego.

From then on humans have perceived and sensed the world from the outside. They have felt their own Self from within. Both activities create incomplete knowledge and create great illusions into which human beings are woven. The mental images of the world become overpowering to the same degree that helpless overcomes the human being within. The fall of man is thereby fulfilled. At the same time the possibility for awakening to the Self during life on earth is begun.

Of course, we do not present these thoughts to our children in the third grade. They listen to the stories with the naïve pathos which lives in their age group. The pictures speak for themselves. But the teacher is far from naïve and must strive to comprehend and carry the deeper meaning.

If we compare the *Bible's* ancient stories with the myths of other peoples, it is remarkable how clearly the Jewish prophets painted the biblical pictures. The way of thinking and the soul characteristics of those who wrote the *Book of Moses* were much more oriented to the physical world and thereby more logical than those of other peoples. Therefore we are tempted to pull many of the stories of the *Bible* down to earth and give them a naturalistic truth, when we should rather strive for a pictorial understanding of them. The difference between ancient Jewish and hedonistic consciousnesses becomes clear when we compare the *Bible's* creation story with that of the Greek Hesiod:

“First of all Chaos appeared, but also the broad-breasted Gaia, she the eternal point that holds us all, and the dark Tartaros in the inner of the broad-breasted earth—and Eros, the most beautiful of all eternal gods, he who removes limbs and overpowers the reasonable will in humans’ and gods’ breasts. But Chaos gave birth to Erebos and the dark night, and thereafter gave birth to the night ether and Hemera (the day and the day’s god)—whom the night brought forth after she made love with Erebos.

Gaia also gave birth to the star-covered Uranos so he could surround her and also be the holy god’s home. And she gave birth to the effervescent Pontos, but without yearning love, and the deeply whirling Okeanos, and so forth.”

Hesiod is supposed to have lived at the same time as Homer. His *Theogoni* is a main source for our knowledge of Greek mythology. The strange, and for us incomprehensible, fact is that we cannot differentiate between object and being in his work. Gaia in the meaning of goddess, mother earth and the earth as physical object become absolutely the same. Pontos, the sea and god of the Sea, are one

and the same thing. Uranos, the visible starry heaven and the godly being, are one and the same revelation.

We find much of the same in all non-Jewish myths. Therefore they are confusing to the way we think today. That is not case with the *Bible's* creation story. From the standpoint of natural science, the stories remain “hanging in thin air.” But they do not confuse us. The creation of the world is seen from an earthly perspective, but the stories do not describe earthly realities.

The same is true if we compare stories of the fall of man in the Old Testament with other mythologies—over fifty stories are collected. Once again the stories within the Jewish tradition are clear, naturalistic stories, even though no one today would believe they pertain to naturalistic events.

How should we work with such stories? The core in each story is usually the same—an old world is destroyed and a chosen few are saved from the catastrophe by higher powers to later establish a new culture. This reminds us of the saga of Atlantis that Plato mentions. In the Old Testament our attention is guided to the Ark with all of the animals. A wonderful picture! In our childhood naïvete we thought the animals that were not part of man's corruption were being saved. That may be the truth, possibly in another context than we believed back then.

Emil Bock calls our attention to the biblical word for Noah's ark, *tebah*, which means the same as the basket in which baby Moses was laid when he was sent out on the Nile.³ This gives us a path to follow. When initiated in ancient mysteries people who were to be guided beyond the illusions of the earthly life were placed in coffins. The physical senses were to be totally closed for the moment when the spiritual reality was revealed to the soul. Jonah in the stomach of the whale is the same theme, as is the ancient Egyptian Osiris myth.

Can we be on the right path when we realize that the *Bible* with the word *tebah* is something that the uninitiated missed? Only he who knows how to read the meaning of the pictures understands that Noah is a high initiate. What about the animals? Zoology was very different in the mystical, ancient times when people named other people after animals: Horsa (horse) who lead the Angles to England, Åre (eagle), Ulf (wolf), Bjorn (bear) and Leo (lion). The names of animals in earlier times meant particular characteristics or soul qualities. In every type of animal man saw an extreme aspect, a fraction of a human, but in superhuman form. We can view the animal kingdom as an enormous mirror to our own being. Thereby the animals became something more than pure nature. They became “symbols,” living expressions of soul forces in the world! Even the superpowers of certain cultures expressed themselves in animal figures, for example the Egyptians' depiction of gods with animal and bird heads.

What remains of that instinctive knowledge is found today in the fables. As with every other science zoology has become materialistic. Today characterizations have become simplistic and crass: we use it in abusive words such as: dumb as a goose, slow as a turtle, or stubborn as an ass.

Noah in the ark surrounded by all of the animals is an initiate picture, or, to use Steiner's expression, an imagination. Wrapped within tebah Noah experiences the soul forces which stand behind the animal kingdom spiritually and which mankind is challenged to develop to a higher level than in nature wherein animals can live out their soul forces as desires. Human beings can refine and transform their desires and raise them to a higher level.

Children in the third grade have a new relationship to the concept of time. During the first two years of school they do not have strong feelings of time. After all, they have just arrived from eternity! Everything happens "now," and the worst thing they know about is everything that happens "later"! That something happened previously, that something follows, even history's path through "time," they now begin to comprehend in clearer mental images. To make everything totally clear would be a mistake. Rather we are satisfied to let pictures of life arise in their natural sequence. That is where the biography of a folk begins.

So far children in the third class have heard "stories." With Abraham, the *Bible's* first down-to-earth person, history begins. This also corresponds to the child's developmental needs. To the threshold I mentioned earlier. In the man chosen by God, Abraham, not only the Jewish people, but the whole of humanity can look to the archetype of the father. In sorrow and joy, he always meets us just as warmly. And what does it mean to have the father image before children at this age? It becomes a life-long model for them. When you think of Abraham it gives you support and strength!

Abraham's life is woven into many sagas and legends—far beyond the Old Testament. The excavations at Ur in Caldea prove that the land from which he traveled enjoyed a high, refined, but also cruel culture. Apparently Abraham's father served a severe despot, Nimrod. In Jewish, non-biblical tradition we are told that astrologers predicted that a specially chosen child would be born, and that Nimrod would be ready to take its life. He murdered children randomly but this child was saved in a cave. This is how the motif appears, veiled half mystically for the first time as a Jewish saga.

Abraham was seventy-five years old when God spoke to him: "Go from this land and from your people and your father's house to the land I will show you." Emil Boch believes it is unreasonable to assume that Abraham left the hedonistic Babylon suddenly in disgust. Rather, step by step he grew into a relationship to God that became the basis for the chosen people and later for all of humanity.

Perhaps one of the most important steps is the meeting with Melkisedek, “King of Salem and priest for the most almighty God.” This king carried forth bread and wine and blessed Abraham, a ritual act that foreshadows modern sacraments. And Abraham silently gave him everything he owned. More is not said. That Melkisedek is known among initiates is expressed in letters to the Hebrews, where Christ is called “the priest according to Melkisedek’s nature ... To that Melkisedek Who, when his name is first named, is the king of justice, and then the king of Salem, is the king of peace, who is without a father, without mother, who neither knows the beginning of day nor the ending of life, but can be compared to God’s son—he becomes the eternal priest.” (*Hebrews* 7, 1–3)

Who was this? A deep riddle. The *Bible* gives no answer but let us assume that only initiates knew the dimensions and meaning of he who is here mentioned. We dare believe that Abraham through his meeting with Melkisedek and the blessings achieved a greater clarity concerning the God he should serve.

The next step is described in relation to the sacrifice of the son. The Lord demands Isaac, and, out of Babylonian tradition where such sacrifices occur (we can recall the Phoenicians’ Moloch who demanded the sacrifice of children), it may be that Abraham does not decipher the meaning. The meaning—that appears in the following story—can only be that Isaac and the entire people called “the chosen ones” shall serve the Lord. But Abraham believes that the world where the human soul has its origin, demands Isaac’s soul back.

The Waldorf teacher should resist presenting the story as a situation in which the Lord creates a “show” to prove whether or not Abraham is willing to comply—the usual translation that The Lord “tempted” Abraham. The words would be more fittingly translated: “Abraham was put through a test of knowledge.”

A more reasonable question would be: What did Isaac experience in this moment and within this context? In non-biblical, Jewish tradition it is told: “As the sword neared Isaac’s throat, his soul flew away. But as the Lord spoke through the Cherub’s voice: ‘Do not lay a hand on the boy,’ Isaac’s soul returned to his body. Abraham released the ropes and pulled him up by his feet. In that moment Isaac experienced a life beyond death. He opened his mouth and said, ‘Praise be to the Lord who awakens the dead to life!’ “ This is an expansion of consciousness, known only to initiates.

But we should not forget that Abraham had an older son. We remember that Sara was long without children and began to doubt the Lord’s promise of a large family “after the numbers of the stars.” She asked Abraham to go to Hagar, her Egyptian fortuneteller. The fruit of that meeting was Ishmael. And then Sara gave birth to Isaac, and Ishmael was shunned. “And Sara said to Abraham: drive out

the fortuneteller and her son! But that made Abraham's sore worse for the sake of his son."

The story tells us that the Lord consoled Abraham and said: "Listen to Sara's voice in this.... But also from the fortuneteller's son I will make a great people, for he too is your child." The *Bible* tells that Ishmael became the father of the Arab people, and Isaac the father of the Jewish people.

Myth, says the scientific world. But what does the story tell? From a historical point of view the Old Testament is the most remarkable document we possess. For on this earth no people, compared with the Israelis, have stood under a more directed upbringing and felt such a higher guidance. The moralistic education that the Jewish people were given has continued through the ages. And through the stories of the Old Testament, countless generations of children can learn as the children of Israel. It is an education that no generation can do without if it wants to become human.

Endnotes

1. See Rudolf Steiner's lecture series *The Secrets of the Creation Stories in the Bible*, Leipzig, Germany, 1910.
2. See Rudolf Steiner's lectures *The Gospel According to Matthew*, SteinerBooks, Great Barrington, MA.
3. Emil Bock's books include *Ancient History, Moses and His Age, and Kings and Prophets*, SteinerBooks, Great Barrington, MA.
4. See Rudolf Steiner's lectures *The Gospel According to Matthew*, SteinerBooks, Great Barrington, MA.