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Creation and what follows

An anarchistic reading of the Bible (2)

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We will have to follow the rest of the story to understand better the political implications of this starting point. But we should notice right away the combination of a lack of state-centeredness and the optimism about the possibilities of this “blessing” spreading widely without domination.

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Should we link “Babel” with later “Babylon,” we may see illustrated the type of “oneness” this Tower stands for—top-down power, disdain for difference, exploitation of the weak in service to the aggrandizement of the elite. A much later vision, in the book of Acts, of human beings being gifted through God’s Spirit to connect despite their differences in languages, points to the type of oneness God endorses.

God’s healing strategy

At the end of chapter 11, following the story of Babel and a genealogy that will connect Noah with the founding of God’s chosen people, we meet the human founders of the Hebrew peoplehood. The initial picture is not encouraging. Abram and Sarai are old and childless, a fitting image of the dead end the human project appears headed for.

However, God creates something new out of this barrenness. God promises them descendants, beyond counting, and the agents of blessing for “all the families of the earth” (12:3). It only becomes clear as we continue with the story just how important this intervention of God is. As it turns out, the vocation God gives Abram, Sarai, and their descendants is God’s response to what happened in Eden, the story of the Flood, and the Tower of Babel. God will bring healing, but it will be patient, non-coercive, based on love and not on domination.

The founding ancestor of God’s chosen people is far from being a king or powerful ruler. And, to pursue his vocation, he is required to leave his home country. God’s work to bring healing to creation at its outset is not linked with territoriality. There is no geographical kingdom and no human king. The method for doing God’s work in the world is “blessing” and this work is intended to encompass “all the families of the earth.”

Rather, Genesis 1–3 may be seen as an affirmation of the fundamental character of human peaceableness and responsiveness to God that is complicated by human freedom. God gives humanity the potential to turn away as a key part of the basic loving nature of the relationships. But the turning away has consequences.

The story, though, does not refute an anarchistic sensibility nearly so much as establish such a sensibility as the default reality for humanity and as the goal toward which post-“fall” human life should strive. The enmity and patriarchy of Genesis three are there in the story as a stimulus toward transformation. These are the problems to be overcome, not a fatalistic portrayal of the inevitable human experience of life as “nasty, brutish, and short.” Tragically, this fatalistic interpretation has underwritten power politics over the centuries—the “fallenness” of humanity used as an excuse for a politics of centralized, coercive power. Of course, the terrible irony is that such a view of the “fall” seems to assume that, in entrusting them with dominating power, the human beings in power are less “fallen” instead of the opposite.

Challenging hegemony

The human proclivity to exercise power in dominating ways seems to be the target in the story of the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11. The short, cryptic story has lent itself to a variety of interpretations. Clearly part of the message is a critique of the inclination to centralize human power and to create a “oneness” that serves centralized power.

In “scattering” the Babel-dwellers (3:4, 8, 9), God seeks to create the conditions for a different kind of oneness—human unity that respects diversity, decentralizes power, and is based on mutual respect. The rest of the Bible’s story describes the long, tenuous process of such a oneness being established.

In this survey of some biblical themes looked at from an anarchistic angle, I will not be real precise in my use of “anarchistic.” I’ll be talking about a sensibility more than a full-fledged political philosophy. The key “anarchistic” motifs I will focus on will be a strong suspicion toward centralized social power, especially kingdoms and empires, and an optimism about human possibilities for self-organizing and decentralized social power.

And I will be reading the Bible in fairly naïve and straightforward ways. I approach the Bible as a storybook and see it as providing a loosely coherent message, amidst a great deal of diversity. I will focus more on the loose coherence than the diversity—largely due to a desire to find usable guidance in the Bible. At the same time, in reading the Bible more as a storybook, I mean to reject any authoritarian dynamics. The story is invitational and winsome, more than coercive or dominantly powerful.

The story of creation

The very beginning of the Bible provides much important information about the Bible as a whole, about the cosmology of the whole, about the character of the God seen to be central to the entire story, and about the relationships between humankind and this God.

Though the creation account in Genesis one portrays God as the power behind what is, the actual exercise of that power is muted. God speaks and what is is made. The dynamic is quite peaceable—in contrast to some other ancient creation myths (especially the Babylonian) that portray violence at the heart of things.

Remarkably, this creator God speaks of human beings (male and female) being created in God’s own image. There humanity is commissioned to care for the rest of creation as God’s stewards. This picture connects with both of our key anarchistic factors. The relationship between God and humanity is not one of domination,

command-and-obedience. It is rather a relationship of like with like. God is not Other; rather, humans are created to be like God. And, perhaps even more importantly, the picture here is that all humanity shares in this divine image—kingly, perhaps, but in a strongly egalitarian sense. As well, human beings are given power and responsibility.

The anarchistic notion that all human beings naturally have an inclination to connect with each other, to live meaningful lives, to exercise power effectively, has strong grounding in this original picture of the creation of human beings. The notation, “male and female,” has powerful meaning in undermining patriarchy. However, its implications can be broadened—by denying one of humanity’s most fundamental bases for hierarchy (sexual), it denies other bases for hierarchy as well.

There is also something notably missing here. There is no sense whatsoever of a buttressing of human kingship and social stratification. The picture here is of a fundamental egalitarianism, goodness, and peaceableness in the human reality. We don’t have indications that point toward the need for human kings, or standing armies, or an economics of scarcity. This account actually provides support for an anarchistic sense of the naturalness of humans relating to one another as equals and with a sense that each person has dignity and agency.

The version of the creation story in Genesis two focuses on humanity. It reinforces the significance of the human vocation to work with God, not simply “under” God. Adam is given great responsibility, to name all the creatures on earth. This account also underscores the fundamentally social character of humanity—the second human is created because the first was “alone” and needed a partner.

The “fall”

A mysterious complicating factor enters the story in chapter two, where human beings are told to avoid the “tree of the knowledge of good and evil” (2:17). Is this restriction an arbitrary rule from a dominating God intended to prevent human enlightenment? Such an interpretation would seem to contradict much of the surrounding story, not to mention much of what follows in the Bible.

Another way to interpret this restriction is to see it as symbolizing innate human limitations. When human beings seek to know and use that knowledge to dominate creation they actually then will devolve into power struggles and develop hierarchies. To avoid such a dynamic, God in the story calls upon them to step back from desiring too much “knowledge,” to accept their limits, and recognize to live in trust.

As the story continues, the “temptation” to violate the restriction becomes too strong, and Adam and Eve break the close connection between themselves and God. Interestingly, the story pictures the break as coming from the human side—after they eat the forbidden fruit, God still seeks to hang around with them in the Garden as had been their habit, but the humans hide from God (3:8), and they become ashamed of their nakedness.

One of the consequences of this turn toward disharmony is the establishment of “enmity” between Adam and Eve (3:15) and of Adam as “ruler” over Eve (3:16). Neither of these dynamics should be seen as God’s will so much as a description of the new tensions and struggles that will characterize human life. The rest of the story, in a general sense, may be seen as God’s work among humanity to overcome this “enmity” and proclivity toward “rulership.”

An anarchistic reading would argue that the “fall” is best seen not as a fundamental change in the character of the human/divine relationship or in the character of inter-human relationships.