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## In the Beginning

We have a long and adventurous road ahead of us. Therefore it may be well to have a brief talk with the reader to let him know what awaits him and what the author has tried to do. Those who do not need these preliminary instructions may begin their reading at once, starting with page twelve.

The question of where we come from and where we are going is one of the elementary challenges of life. Perhaps it is *the* question of life. Only when we get an answer to it do we learn who we are.

Often we meet a person we cannot quite make out. Then we are likely to inquire about the family he comes from and his social milieu. Medical men inquire into a criminal's hereditary background; psychologists probe into the traumata of youth, the first impressions of life and even prenatal influences; astrologists determine the configuration of the planets at the time of birth; and the contemporaries of Jesus said: "He comes from Nazareth, a hick town. Can anything good come out of Nazareth? Such a commonplace origin disproves his claim to be someone extraordinary."

And always these inquiries, the serious ones and the superstitious ones, proceed on the same assumption: If I know the origin of a man (or of "man" himself), if I know where he comes from, then I also know what he amounts to, then I know his secret.

It is certainly worth asking whether the great interest that our

generation has shown in prehistory and primitive history may not likewise be explained from this point of view. Books with titles like *Gods, Graves, and Scholars; I Searched for Adam*, and many others, are best sellers today. Why is it that people, who live so much in the present as we do and who watch the future of atomic development with such fascination and anxiety, should be seeking in such great numbers to penetrate the veil that covers the past and wanting to trace back as far as possible the trail of mankind? This is surely remarkable and it should make us stop and think.

I do not believe that this is primarily scientific curiosity, that it is merely a prehistorical hobby, so to speak, or even a flight from the problems of the day into what is remote. I rather think that here again is the upthrust of the same disturbing question: Where do we human beings come from? Quite simply, we are seeking the secret of our life. We no longer know what we are. What a strange and enigmatic breed we are! Presently we shall be flying in space, but at the same time we are threatening to blow up the base of this voyage into space, namely, our own planet. We conquer space and time with our machines, but these machines also appear to be conquering us. We change the face of the earth, but on our own faces are the same old runes of guilt, suffering, and death. Despite everything we have created, we are still the same as the men of old: Cain and Abel, Achilles and Thersites, Siegfried and Hagen. Who are we, really; where do we come from?

This question of origin is thus a good one, but it is not being put in the right way.

In any case, we ask quite different questions about *nature*. For example, if we want to know what a rose is, we do not inquire about its origin, we do not look at its seed or its bud, but rather examine the full-blown blossom. Only when it has reached its utmost maturity, its final form, do we learn what colors, forms, and odors the rose holds within itself, and therefore what its nature is. Anselm of Canterbury, the great theologian, once said:

If you want to know what quartz is, you do not investigate the rock from which it comes, but rather the crystal into which it is developing. Only then will you know what quartz is, and get at its nature.

Now this way of putting the question sounds quite plausible. If I want to know what technology is, I do not go to the German Museum in Munich and look at the first miserable steam locomotive. Rather I look for the latest and most highly developed product of technology; I look at an electronic brain or an atomic pile.

But, applied to us men, this would mean that, if we want to know what man is, we must examine him at the height of his development. And perhaps today this would be to examine him at the point where he is about to conquer social misery and is moving toward the welfare state, where his medical science is adding decades to human life, where his chemistry is extracting food for millions from the earth, and automation is about to provide us with two sabbath days in a week and thus surpass the paltry beginning of creation in which God could spare us only *one* day off.

But the remarkable and highly disconcerting fact is that we do *not* proceed in this way. The fact is that when we want to know who we men are, we do not investigate, as we do with a rose, the final stage of maturity. We do not ask how far progress can bring man today or by 1984 and what kind of a being he may reveal himself to be. No, the fact is that we inquire about the *bud*, we examine his prehistoric origins; in the last analysis we inquire about Adam and Eve. Even Marxism has done the same thing; it sees the nature of man realized in his first germinal beginnings, namely, when primitive communism still prevailed. Subsequent history is then not simply a maturing and advance, but more a fall from this prototype and goal; it is a process of degeneration, namely, a history of class struggles.

*Why* is it that when we are dealing with man we go backwards to search out his origin?

The answer is that we human beings know very well, or at least dimly suspect, that when we grow older and when the whole human race grows older something is going on that is totally different from the blooming, ripening, and self-unfolding which we observe in nature and in a rose. For what is growing in human life is not only the gifts and blessings God put into our life. The seeds the dark Adversary planted in our hearts by night are also springing up.

True, as we grow older, our mind and understanding grows too, and this is a gift of God. But think of all the crooked pursuits and evil thoughts with which this mind occupies itself! After all, every crook, every tyrant has at his disposal a considerable quota of this gift of God. But what does he, what do we, do with it? Sometimes it might be well if we were a little more stupid.

Then there is another thing that is true. When mankind matures it is true that it flowers and produces many advances; but in the midst of all that is positive and good the same old poisonous weed springs up alongside it. We utilize the forces of nature, we subdue the earth, we accept all the potentialities which God has placed in his creation; but at the same time we use them to destroy, to kill, to poison, and to hate.

So, obviously, we can no longer recognize *what* God meant us to be when he created us, *what* he had in mind when he planned the image of man, by looking at what we really are and what we are today. And, because we know this, we go back to the bud, we go looking for the original design. We go hunting for the origin of man in order to find out what man really was before the catastrophe that disfigured and defaced him.

Now it would certainly be naïve to think that the primitive age of mankind could furnish us with any information that would help us at this point. Nevertheless, it may be some kind of correct instinct that leads us in this direction. Might not the first pages of the Bible, which tell us about the beginning of the world, be of some help to us? Might not these pages be able to give us an

answer to our feckless question of what God really and originally intended man to be?

For it is these first pages of the Bible that deal with the problem. There we are shown *why* men do not simply develop as flowers do and why they do *not* reveal what they are in the process of flowering and maturing. For, according to these first pages, we are told that we are no longer what we were when we left the hands of God, but instead that something happened in between—that man seized the forbidden fruit, that he desired to be more than a child and creature, and that now a disastrous rift has been driven through history by Cain and Esau and Nebuchadnezzar and Judas—in short, that we have become something different from the image we were intended to be.

So if I want to know who I really am and what God intended me to be, I must go back behind the lost paradise, I must look to the morning of creation and try to hear the first words that God spoke to me and my father Adam.

So let us enter upon a journey back to that first day of the world. We are setting out for a great and very exciting goal. It will be, so to speak, a voyage of study and discovery which we begin with the exposition of these ancient texts; and therefore we shall conduct ourselves as explorers do when they are on an expedition. No matter who they were, Sven Heden or Amundsen, they all had one decisive question in their minds, one question they were seeking to solve and which determined the whole route of their journey. We too have a question which we propose to explore. It is the question of who we are, whence we came, and what God intended when he gave us life. We are not going to study prehistory and archeology; rather we hope to learn something about the meaning of our life.

The chapters of this book contain addresses which the author delivered over a period of two years to an audience made up of all professions and ages in the large Church of St. Michael in Hamburg. In this difficult task—how could it be otherwise

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with these texts that tower above us like mountain peaks—he was encouraged above all by the sight of large numbers of young people and their attentive faces. In numerous discussions and letters they besieged him with their questions and difficulties, and the inevitable result was that these discussions somehow got themselves written into and between the lines of this book and thus acquired a presence which helped to overcome the danger of their becoming a mere monologue.

I think back with gratitude upon these hours of thinking together, of teaching and learning, of preaching and listening.

Each time I began by saying, “Today we hear what is written in Genesis, chapter so and so, verse so and so,” it had only been a short time since this member of the audience was still at work in the harbor, another in his office, and a third somewhere on an assembly line or a building construction. And so it may have been that at first these stories appeared not only strange and unfamiliar but also a bit remote from the reality of the world. The Garden of Eden looked so completely different from our garden plot at home or the neighborhood park. And never before had we met a serpent like this, which was able to carry on a religious discussion, not even in a circus or a zoo. The Flood was quite unlike any rainstorm we had ever experienced. The tower of Babel too had something strange and archaic about it, standing there like a bizarre prehistoric monster beside the Eiffel Tower and the Empire State Building and all the other skyscrapers of our time. We citizens who live our lives between asphalt and concrete were somewhat at a loss as we contemplated the primitive rock of these strange, primeval, lunar peaks.

But once we entered this massif, once we took hold of the words of these ancient texts and turned them over in our minds, these messages suddenly became relentless in the way they struck straight home to us. Sometimes they were comforting and sometimes they were also threatening; but always we felt that they were surrounding us. The serpent suddenly became more aggressively present than the dog that barks at me in my

neighborhood. Noah's ark was closer than the subway from which I had just alighted. And God's great "Let there be!" suddenly became so tremendously real that compared with it the screaming advertisements on the billboards, the hundred-fold ballyhooing of toothpastes, margarines, and tourist attractions became as unreal as soap bubbles. Here it suddenly became relentlessly clear that the God who caught up with Adam and said, "Where are you?" is also my God. The guilt of Cain toward his brother is exactly the same as that which stands between me and my neighbor. The altar of Noah on the first bit of dry land is also a summons to me: "How oft the Lord of grace did spread his wings above thee!" And the rainbow that shone like an arc of divine promise above the receding Flood is also a sign for me from another world when I walk through the valley of the shadow and cry out from the depths.

There is still another respect in which we are all related to these people of the primeval age, even though they still used bow and arrow and walked the fields and deserts on foot whereas we launch atomic rockets and rush from pole to pole in stratospheric clippers: for them and for us today God was far away and invisible. None of them ever saw him face to face. They saw him only in a mirror dimly and heard him only through his dark Word (I Cor. 13:12). Eve saw only the shining apple, swinging in the breeze of paradise. She heard only the words of the serpent. God seemed to be playing no part in this scene. He was remote and seemed unreal compared with the fascination of the moment. Only in the cool of the evening were his footsteps heard in the distance. Nor did Cain see God. He saw only his hated brother whom he would kill; and then he saw "red." But God was not in this red. Nor did Noah see God. He saw only the endless, hopeless flood and his lonely ship in the midst of the void. And all the signs were against the coming of a rescuer, of a hand that could cope with these turbulent elements.

And, finally, the people who built the tower of Babel did not

see God either. They were bewitched by what they were able to accomplish. They were the ancestors of the atomic strategists of today and the space-travelers of tomorrow. They felt confirmed and vindicated when they succeeded in building up into the boundless blue and nobody seemed to stop them. To them Sputnik was more real than the "good Lord."

None of them saw God. They all saw something totally different. They *saw* what they loved and hated; they *felt* what made them freeze and sweat; and they *wanted* what each day required of them, work in the fields and their daily wages. They wanted their food and their physical pleasure; they wanted sleep and their possessions and their prestige. They saw and they felt and they wanted a thousand things—everything except God. For them he was very far away, he was hardly even true.

But a few of them were very near to him, though in a mysterious way: Abel perhaps and Noah and later Abraham. They were so close to him that the fear in their hearts, the flood, and the strange country hardly mattered to them, so close that God became the most real thing in their lives and they lived in his peace as in arks, fortresses, and homesteads. *But*—they had him only in the sense that they had to *believe* in him.

What is this then, this faith that caused them to endure life, that put solid ground under their feet, and above their heads the shining rainbow of God?

So, actually, this book is concerned with only one question: What does it mean to believe?

Believing is by no means merely a question of *what* I believe in, but always also the question of *against what* I believe. For faith must always struggle against appearances. We do not see what we believe, at any rate not until the moment comes when faith is permitted to see what it has believed, and unbelief is *compelled* to see what it has *not* believed.

Among the many things that distort our view of God, and "against" which we must therefore believe, are our misunder-

standings. Often misunderstandings are based upon the fact that we confuse the figurative, mythical, ancient-cosmological forms of expression in these texts of the first chapters of Genesis with the thing itself, instead of seeing in them the code language of a time long past which we must translate into the clear words of our own language. In this way the biblical form of expression, which ought to be transparent for some very elementary news which is of immense importance to us, becomes for many of us an iron curtain that hides them from our view and cuts them off from our ears like a soundproof wall.

I am not concerned with cheap apologetics when I seek to remove misunderstandings. For I have no desire to tone down these texts and prepare them appetizingly so that respectable citizens of the twentieth century can swallow them with pleasure and digest them without getting a stomach-ache. It is only when we are led through all these misleading misconceptions—which provoke a *wrong* offense—to the thing *itself*, that the real excitement begins. For only then do the real, decisive questions arise. And then there will also be provocations and offenses, but in any case decisions, made necessary by the claim of these texts.

It is obvious that it takes some labor of thought to arrive at this point. The message of these texts is not to be had cheaply. Not infrequently was the preacher himself driven to the edge of despair when after an effort of thought he failed to express the ultimate result in the simplicity and naturalness which befits the fateful questions of existence.

So I leave this book to its reader not without misgivings and yet in the hope that Another will know how to make something out of the fragments of an imperfect person. For in the hands of the Master even faulty instruments can be made to sing and to perform a work that is significant.