GENESIS:
IN THE BEGINNING

Program Sixteen
Last term, I was concerned with trying to build up a unified picture of the narrative and imagery of the Bible, and the emphasis consequently was on its imaginative unity, the unity as revealed by the myth and metaphor that form its structure. But the Bible's disregard for unity is quite as impressive as its observance of it: it's just as possible to look at it as a large miscellaneous heap of badly established texts. Everything that could possibly go wrong with a book has gone wrong with the Bible at some stage or other in its history. So the Bible, therefore, is a unity which has passed beyond unity. It's not a matter of its having failed to achieve it, but of its having got past it to something which includes it.

There are two senses, in other words, in which we can use the word 'imperfect'. We can think of it as a limited or inadequate quality which falls below perfection, or we can think of it, as the tenses of the Hebrew language suggest, as the difference between the perfected, that which is finished and complete, and that which is still continuous and alive. The Bible has tried to present its unified message in that deliberately imperfect way: I'll try to show you something of that in the ending of the Book of Revelation, which as I said, is a remarkably open ending for a book of that length.

Now what I want to do this term is to examine a series of what seem to me to be phases in what the Bible has to say, phases of what is traditionally called revelation. It's a rather tricky business to try to understand what the Bible means by revelation, because in the course of centuries, we have eventually realized that its revelation is not the communicating either of historical knowledge or of scientific and natural knowledge. At the same time, revelation does seem to imply the communicating of some kind of knowledge, and the real nature of that knowledge is what I want to examine.

It seems to me that there is a progressive sequence in the Bible of stages, not so much of revelation itself, as of the understanding of it. First, creation; then revolution, which is the Exodus from Egypt; then law, which follows the Exodus; then wisdom, or the individualizing of the law; then prophecy: those five stages all have their center of gravity in the Old Testament. There are two others with their center of gravity in the New Testament: the gospel, and the Second Coming or apocalypse. That will be our general outline for this term, which means of course that we have to begin with the conception of creation in the Bible as it's set out at the beginning of Genesis and referred to elsewhere.

There are certain questions that obviously come to mind when you're reading the Biblical account of Genesis. One is, why is there such an insistence on days of the week, and why does the Bible talk about the first, the second and the third day before the sun
was created to measure time? Another one is, why is the account of creation in the Bible so intolerably patriarchal? The creating God in the Bible is assumed to be male, which obviously must be a metaphor, because he is the creator of both male and female. We are also told that at the beginning of things, the first woman's body was created out of the body of the first man, in a violent reversal of everything that has happened since. For questions like that, there are always immediate answers: the emphasis on the seven days was put in to rationalize the law of the Sabbath, and the emphasis on the maleness of the creating agent was put in to rationalize the doctrines of male supremacy in ancient society. Now I have no doubt that those answers are true as far as they go. They don't go far enough to be very interesting, so I'm going to ignore their truth and try to get a little further.

First of all, in the beginning—the Hebrew simply says, in beginning, beresheth, God created the heaven and the earth. Now one of the first questions that's likely to come to a child's mind is: what happened before that? Or, more accurately, what was God doing sitting around all that time before making the world? Saint Augustine said that what God was doing before creation was preparing a hell for those who asked questions of that kind: which perhaps tells you more about Saint Augustine than it does about God. But to be told that we should not ask a question of course merely increases its urgency in any healthy mind.

So what took place before the creation? Well, in the first place, that question has got fouled up with the category of time, because the category of time is the fundamental way in which we perceive reality. Considering that the category of time is divided into three dimensions, the past, present and the future, that none of these dimensions actually exists, because the past doesn't exist any longer, and the future doesn't exist yet, and the present never quite exists at all, it seems a funny way to grasp reality. But that's the way we do grasp reality: we grasp it with a category which is totally nonexistent.

Further, you will see if you try it that it is entirely impossible to think of the beginning of time. You can talk about a beginning of time, talk about it forever, but you cannot actually think of the notion. A beginning of time is unthinkable. Consequently, all notions of the eternal in religion which mean endless time are notions which have not got clear of the category of time. Popular Christianity tells us that after death we live forever either in heaven or in hell, meaning endlessly in time. But in saying eternal when you mean endless time, you are not getting clear of the category of time at all. Jesus uses the term aionios, which the King James Bible translates as 'everlasting'; and if you think carefully about that word 'everlasting' as a translation for aionios, you'll see that
it's a little masterpiece of question-begging. 'Everlasting' means persisting indefinitely in time.

However, early Christianity discovered that Christianity would be much more salable if you perverted its good news into bad news, and in particular if you put at the center of your teaching the doctrine that after death, unless you did what you were told at this moment, you would suffer tortures for eternity, meaning endlessly in time. Every system of organized priestcraft has had a doctrine of that kind, and the only thing to be said in favor of it is that it makes sin creative: that is, we owe a great deal more to the people who went on sinning in spite of it than we do to the people who tried to restrain sin by threatening it. But that is merely an example of what John Bunyan says, that the mouth of hell is open at the gate of heaven, and that turning God into the devil is one of the commonest of all theological errors. So whatever the word 'eternal' means, try to think of it as something that transcends the category of time altogether, and then you'll get a little closer to what the Bible is talking about.

So, negatively, that brings you to a partial and tentative answer to the question, why does the Bible insist on an absolute beginning? Clearly, it is trying to assert that the category of time is not the ultimate category, and that the activity of God as the Bible understands it in Genesis cannot be put on the same level as this moving belt of past, present and future that we experience as time. The doctrine of an absolute beginning, which is something you cannot think as long as you are talking about the category of time itself, is there to indicate that the creation comes out of a world which is above time.

In the seventeenth century, the age of Galileo and Newton, Biblical scholars, including Newton himself, were gravely explaining to each other that the creation probably took place in 4004 B.C., probably at the spring equinox, probably around ten in the morning. So the discoveries in the nineteenth century in geology, which eventually pushed the age of the earth back to about two billion years, if not three—but as the government will be saying in the future, what's a billion?—made an impact that was out of all proportion to its importance. But scientists, of course, like anybody else, find that they can't get along without creation myths; and eventually we have a Big Bang creation myth, which says that the world exploded, oh, say fifteen billion years ago or thereabouts, and has been scattering in all directions ever since.

Well, that's fine: what happened before that? And you immediately are up against the fact that as long as you are thinking of the order of nature, the conceptions of beginning and end do not apply. But we begin and we end, and because of what Thomas Pynchon calls creative paranoia in the
human consciousness, we insist that because we begin and we end, beginnings and endings must be much more deeply built into the scheme of things. And so we start out the Biblical creation myth with an absolute beginning, associated at the end of Revelation with an absolute end.

The first phenomena of creation were light and sound; and in one of Chaucer's poems, an eagle picks up the poet and takes him on a flight to the House of Fame, and keeps talking the whole time, which makes Chaucer very nervous because he is held in the eagle's mouth, and he doesn't want the eagle to drop him. The eagle gives him a long speech on the nature of sound and of words, and he says, among other things, 'Sound is naught but air abroken', that is, words are air. It's a traditional enough association.

My point here is that the Creed speaks of God as having made all things visible and invisible, and there are systems of thought including some Christian ones, which assume that there are two orders of existence, one invisible and the other visible, and that the invisible world is a higher order of reality. That doesn't seem to be the way the Bible thinks of things at all. As soon as you start trying to think of things that you can't see but know exist, the first thing you would think of would be the air. You can't see the air. If you could, you could see nothing else. You'd be living in a dense fog, and fog is in fact an extremely important metaphor in the Bible, as we'll see when we get to the Book of Ecclesiastes. It's the basis of the word which is translated in that book as 'vanity'. And in a sense, paradoxical as it sounds, we don't really see light either, as distinct from seeing a source or a reflection of light. What we see is symbolically and metaphorically fire, the source of light, rather than light itself. So the Bible doesn't think of the invisible world as a superior order. It thinks of it as that by means of which the world becomes visible: that is, the invisible world is the medium of the visible world. It is the emptiness that permits things to exist. The twentieth century philosopher Heidegger says that the first question of philosophy is, why are there things rather than nothing? And he eventually winds up with the answer that, if there were not nothing, there would be no things.

God is invisible for the same reason that air is invisible. If he were directly visible, well, then he would have been an entirely different metaphysical setup: but when Isaiah says that he saw the Lord high and lifted up, or when Ezekiel has the vision of the chariot, they mean that they see a source of visibility, just as when we look at the sun we see the source of visibility. That's what I mean by the doctrine of the invisible in the Bible, that the invisible is the medium by which the world becomes visible. If God were not invisible, the world would not be visible; that is, God would not then be a Creator.
Now I've said that myth and metaphor, rather than the historical and doctrinal, are the basis of literal meaning in the Bible. So the question arises, what is the metaphorical kernel, let us say, of this conception of beginning? It might be, as I suggested a few moments ago, the metaphorical kernel of getting born: we begin when we join a continuum of living creatures, and we end when we drop off it. But actually, a much clearer metaphorical basis is that of the experience of waking up in the morning, where you dismiss a dark, chaotic, confused world. You simply abolish that world, and with the help of your alarm clock, you enter a world which you consider for practical purposes more real, though any philosopher could tie you in any number of knots about its reality. Still, as far as you're concerned, it's the real world, and you get up and get dressed. This metaphorical kernel of abolishing a world of chaos and finding a world which for practical purposes is your real world in front of you is as close as we get to the experience of an actual beginning.

Now, I previously said that many creation myths begin with a hero-god killing a dragon, who represents the chaos of the world before the creation, and I've cited the Babylonian poem, *Enuma Elish*, where Marduk, the hero-god of Babylon, kills the sea monster, Tiamat, chops her in two, makes heaven from half of her and earth from the other half. We have tried to suggest that this dragon fight, which is referred to many times in the Old Testament, lies closely behind the account of creation in Genesis. One reason why it is not mentioned there is that the dragon by this time is being conceived in negative terms as pure inerterness. That is, you don't have to kill the dragon; the dragon is death, and to kill death is to bring to life.

And I suspect that it is this immediate connection with the experience of waking up that accounts partly for the metaphor of days in the creation. Of course, there are historical and cultural reasons. There's the law of the Sabbath. The law of the Sabbath itself derives probably from an original lunar cult, and in a sense, the symbolic or metaphorical moon is older than the sun. A tribe of desert wanderers would find that the sun was a killer, and that the moon was a friendly guide on their night journeys, and hence they would be very apt to make a friendly deity out of the moon. There are many traces of a very early lunar cult among the Hebrews in pre-Biblical times, and one of these traces is the emphasis on the numerical unit of seven days of the week, which marks the phase of the moon. In the Gospel of John, the Word of God is spoken of as a light shining in darkness, and of course a light shining in darkness suggests the moon, or a bright star like the star of Bethlehem, rather than the sun. So the moon is to that degree a more eloquent symbol of beginning even than the sun. We're told that the words like 'hallelujah', which have to do with the
praising of God, were in pre-Biblical times connected with new moon festivals and with the greeting of the new moon in the sky. The three-day rhythm of the old moon, the dark night, and the new moon has woven itself very intricately into the Christian Passion symbolism.

And so, as I say, I think it is the metaphorical connection between the idea of a beginning and the experience of waking up that accounts for the emphasis on the day, which begins, you'll notice, with the evening: 'And the evening and the morning were the third day', and so on, even though the machinery to regulate days did not appear until the fourth day.

So far I've been talking about the account of creation in the first chapter of Genesis. That comes from what scholars call the Priestly narrative, which is much the latest of the major documents that make up the first five books of the Bible. A second and much older account of the Creation begins in Genesis 2:4: 'These are the generations of the heavens and of the earth when they were created, in the day that the Lord God made the earth and the heavens'. The one that comes first is the later, the more philosophical account, where Creation is thought of metaphorically as the creation of dry land out of the waters: that is, chaos is metaphorically identified with the waters or the face of the deep, and practically the first act of the creation is a separating of the dry land from the sea. In the older account, you begin with a universal drought, and the creative act starts with what the King James Bible calls a 'mist' in verse 6 but which in the Septuagint is ἐγέ, 'fountain', which makes a great deal more sense.

Now if you examine creation myths across the world, you will find that certain recurring types seem to sort themselves out, and one very common kind of creation myth is the sexual creation myth, which says essentially that the world came to be in the first place in the same way that it still comes into being in the springtime, when lambs are born from sheep, and new seeds sprout out of the ground. You have in that kind of myth a sexual creation myth, and it is essentially a myth which accounts for the origin of life, for the beginning of things that live, animals and plants. They first came into being in the same way that they still do. Now in the world that we know, everything that lives has been born from a female body, and so in mythology the sexual creation myth is very frequently and very naturally associated with some kind of earth-mother. This earth-mother has both a cherishing and a sinister aspect: cherishing because everything comes to birth from her body, and sinister because everything that dies returns to her body. She is both the womb and the tomb of all forms of life, the mother of life and the mother of death. There is no rule without many exceptions in mythology, but that is a very common type of creation myth.
Now you'll notice that that creation myth has underlying it the notion of an endlessly turning cycle. The new life comes in the spring. What was before that? There was the winter. What was before the winter? The last spring, and so on back. It's a myth which conforms to the facts of nature to the extent that it does not try to answer the question about an absolute beginning. Sexual creation myths turn on the question, which came first, the chicken or the egg, and there is no answer to that question. You simply go back in an endless cycle of time.

I've tried to show in my analysis of its imagery and narrative that the Bible strongly resists this conception of cyclical fatality. It talks more about absolute beginnings and absolute ends, and this tendency goes back to the particular kind of creation myth that it has. In the Bible, the creation myth is an artificial one. That is, the world originally was made. In a play of Bernard Shaw's, somebody quotes the Horatian tag that poets are born and not made. Somebody says that that's a silly thing to say because everybody's born and not made. But not according to the Book of Genesis: everything at first, including the first man and woman, was made, and the cycle of birth was instituted later. Just as it is natural to associate a sexual creation myth with an earth-mother, so it is natural to associate this artificial creation myth with a sky-father. It is easy to think of God as a father because he's a mysterious being who goes to his work in some office to which you can't follow him, and doesn't nurture his children. I've spoken of the Biblical resistance to the idea of cyclical fatality, and the mother is the parent that we have to break from in order to get born. The creation myth of the Bible associates this conception of the break from the mother, in this case the earth-mother, with that cycle that goes around and around forever without ever stopping.

Then again, I said that the sexual creation myth was a myth about living things, whereas, if you put some kind of mythmaking Robinson Crusoe into a landscape by himself and took all his social conditioning away from him—it isn't possible, but we could think of it experimentally—and said, now you produce a creation myth, the kind of creation myth he would produce would depend on whether he was looking up or looking down at the point at which you've released him. If he were looking down, he would see the cycle of animals and plants coming out of the ground in the springtime, the sap moving in the trees, the new lambs being born, and so forth; and that would condition him in the direction of an earth-mother, a sexual creation myth. But if he looked up, he would see the sun going across the sky, and what was unmistakably the same sun coming back again the next morning. So if he looks down to the cycle of animals and plants, he sees what Plato would call the cycle of the different, because the new life is never the same as the old life. The flowers that bloom
in the spring are never the same flowers that bloomed the previous spring. But up in the sky, there is the sun with its daily recurrence, the moon with its slower recurrence, and eventually the planets with theirs; and that suggests something more like planning and intelligence. Hence, the artificial myth tends to become associated with the upper cycle, the cycle of the same rather than of the different.

The cycle of the same suggests a sense of planning and intelligence and ordering; that is, this sexual creation myth suggests what Spinoza would call the *natura naturans*, nature as a living organism. Whereas, what you collect from the movements of the sun and moon in the sky is rather the sense of *natura naturata*, of nature as a structure or system, where all things return to their sources. It depends, of course, on the social organization that man belongs to. The notion of a sky-creator is said to be an extremely ancient one, but in early or primitive societies, this sky-creator doesn't do anything. He leaves the government of the world to inferior beings, a pattern that reflects a kind of tribal organization of society. But when you get into more highly developed societies like the late Roman Empire, you find that all the effective gods have retreated into the sky, and that there then becomes a connection between the sense of a natural order and a moral order.

If you are in a cycle that goes around without stopping, then you are in a sense an embryo; there's a bigger womb that you never escape from; and what's more, this endlessly turning cycle is, when you analyze it closely, a mechanical symbol. The Hebrew word for embryo is *golem*, and in Jewish legend the golem became a mechanical monster like the one of Frankenstein's. This means that Jesus' emphasis on the Father has a great deal to do with this sense of an order higher than that of time and with the sense of the urgency about waking up into this order above time and above the area of mother nature. That's what Christianity calls resurrection.