

## **The Scandal of Particularity**

(Genesis 15:1-12)

From experience it seems natural for men and women to think in universal concepts. What do I mean by that? Many people, for example, whether they say they believe in God or whether they say they don't believe in God, think that they have an idea of the qualities that a god, if there is one, will have. They deduce these qualities from the human ability to reason. This reasoning starts with human qualities and extends them to God. Thus human beings know things about the world. Because God is, by definition, immensely greater than us, then God will be all knowing. Human beings can love each other so God must be all loving. Thus any human quality you can think of can be applied, in a magnified, way to God. These are all universal concepts that any person can arrive at by exercising their capacity to think and reason. In this way we arrive at a fairly common saying; "there are many paths, but they all lead to the one God." What people mean when they say this is that peoples from different cultures may have different rituals and ways of worshipping, but it is the same God being worshipped and that we can know the nature of this God by exercising our reason.

What I have just set out is just one way that people have tried to prove that God exists. There are many arguments claiming to prove that Gods exists. The argument from design claims that because we think we can see design in nature there must be a great and a supreme designer. The cosmological argument says that because we have deduced that everything we know has a cause, therefore the universe must have a cause and that cause is called God. The anthropological argument says that human beings can think logically, mathematically, scientifically, musically, and so on. These abilities, it is claimed, exist because there is a supreme mind.

Now I want you to note one thing about these ways of proving the existence of God. None of them has to lead to a person doing anything. This is because the arguments prove, if they prove anything, the existence of an abstract principle - a supreme designer, a first cause, a supreme mind. An abstract principle does not require any kind of commitment. We can have academic discussions about such principles but that is about all they lead to.

I am going to contrast these proofs of God from universally accessible ideas with what we discover in the Bible, or what someone has described as “the strange new world of the Bible.” What we meet in the Bible is not a presentation of ideas about the world and God. What we meet is an invitation to join up, an invitation to become part of a particular and distinctive event that has universal consequences.

The Bible, to repeat myself, invites us to become part of a particular event – but an event that has universal consequences. We can get an idea of what this means by knowing that Biblical man saw himself existing in a particular history of liberation. Through the creation of Israel in the promise to Abraham, through the exodus from slavery in Egypt, a people understood itself to be part of a history through which God was bringing a new and peaceable order into being. This event is a history of liberation from a broken humanity to a new humanity. For the Christian this particular history of liberation culminates in Jesus Christ who is the embodiment of the divine purpose for the cosmos in a particular person at a particular time. According to the witness of the Bible, therefore, God is known through a particular history that has universal consequences.

Biblical man, therefore, did not develop universal ideas of God that arose from reasoning about the world. One Biblical scholar has claimed that the people of the Bible would have regarded the arguments for the existence of God from general principles as faithless rebellion against God who reveals his will and purpose in history. Now because God is known in particular events of history culminating in the resurrection and crucifixion of Jesus Christ, men and women are invited to participate in this history. They are invited, as I said earlier, to join a movement that knows, and lives by, the saving and purpose of God in his history in the world.

If anybody does join up to this particular movement with universal consequences he or she will become part of an alien people. They are alien people in our society because, although they are at home in it, they also see something that cannot otherwise be seen without God’s history with Israel and its culmination in Christ. If a seismic shift has occurred in the world in Christ, and surely the resurrection of one man as the first of many resurrections is a seismic event, then the people who truly know this are genuinely at the cutting edge of society. Such people presumably

anticipate God's peaceable and healing world order by the way that they live in their communities now.

The claim that the identity and universal purpose of God is revealed in a particular history is found to be offensive by many of those who argue for the existence of God from general ideas. Such a claim, they feel, seems to be an insult to human reason. Yet the truth is that all the so-called proofs of the existence of God never arrive at a loving and liberating God whose concern is to heal and thus transform human life by an act of new creation that is what the resurrection heralds. They conceive of God as a divine watchmaker who winds up the world and steps back from further involvement. This God is a first cause of everything, but a first cause is utterly impersonal. The God who is revealed a personal event in a particular history is more engaging and hopeful than an abstract concept. This is the claim of Judaism and Christianity but it remains scandalous to those who shape God through their reason.