

“In the Beginning”

The dearest and best known stories in the Western world start off with “In the beginning” or something similar. While other traditions may have a different format, their stories invariably center around how the world came into being because that’s where we find ourselves. We’re dealing here with a primitive sense of history though many ancient societies were unfamiliar with the concept. Any culture without a tale of its origins and that of the world can’t hold together for long. Most claim that everything we see had a definite origin from God (or from the gods) and hence are religious in tone. Obviously, scientific stories are non-existent. No culture can fall in love with mere facts and sustain itself for long. If you don’t elaborate the so-called first cause of philosophy with a story, everything hangs out there pretty much randomly and without meaning. No question about it, so logical and obvious. “In the beginning” holds a culture together at the most basic level of them all.

When Jews and Christians hear the words “in the beginning,” immediately there comes to mind the Book of Genesis notable by reason of both its theological and historical implications. The specifically Christian correspondence are the opening words of St John’s Gospel, “In the beginning was the Word.” The beauty of a beginning is its openness to all sorts of interpretations from the most scholarly to the lowliest man on the street. All can identify with these, the Most Important Words in the world. Not only that, in the final analysis each person’s interpretation is correct, leaving side minor linguistic and theological variations, because all share a single common denominator. That’s how deep and important beginnings are to us, rooted within our very selves and the earth upon which we walk.

Just the fact that we’re reflecting on the idea shows the difficulty of laying hold of it because nothing had existed before “in the beginning.” Rootedness in this, the most basic reality of them all, is a cause for joy and a sign that we share the same essential religious heritage. Even persons not within this Judeo-Christian tradition, pagans included, have an overall feel for their origin and celebrate it in various ways. Everyone has an idea, even if it’s vague, that Someone or Something else is responsible for having brought them into being and are sustaining them right now. Furthermore, this invisible Agent had established a connection between Itself and us through countless generations of people. And to this ever present beginning we shall return which, as many traditions claim, will judge us upon how we had conducted ourselves in life.

A beginning is more than an idea affecting a culture or religion. It lies at the root of our recollective faculty, a phrase more appealing than the common term “memory.” When you remember something, often it’s associated with events, facts and the like. However, “recollective faculty,” while proper to memory, is more comprehensive and embraces members of a given society with a shared culture. At least that’s how I like to see it, influenced by Plato’s concept of recollection as *anamnesis*, a kind of making-present the past with a view to projecting it into the future. Shortly we’ll discuss the term “beginning” as it applies to Genesis and John’s Gospel, the two being related for Christians. But before that, let’s present some reflections about this term and how it affects us...not scholarly by any shot of the imagination...but ideas to help get the ball rolling.

Perhaps the most concrete experience of a beginning is the dawn of a new day. Every person from all cultures recognizes this because it’s so obvious and predictable. Both the preceding night and day before may have been

miserable, but dawn represents a new day. If we're awake during those hours prior to sunrise and sensitive to them, they preclude us from falling into the trap of "just another day" even before it gets under way. We see darkness fading away little by little, perhaps more miraculous than the opposite, evening, when night sets in. Hence dawn is a perennial symbol of hope. Things may change a bit later after we've taken the first cup of coffee, but for a few brief glorious moments we've experienced life fresh from the womb, as it were, free from anxiety. At this juncture thoughts and emotions haven't yet rushed in to color our day because the previous night still holds sway over our awareness. Keeping this interior commotion at bay makes us realize we've experienced something special which is difficult to possess around the clock. In fact, the story of humanity may be taken as summed up in an attempt at repossession of this special time. As of now we are free from mental baggage which almost always involves negative stuff. We may not be able to articulate it to ourselves, but this state is key to an understanding of "In The Beginning." So before consenting to the inevitable or when the day is about to start its irreversible course, we can experiment by stretching out this special time. Not easy to do because still we're under the influence of last night's sleep and naturally are inclined either to go back to bed or to shake it off entirely and face the day. The former is what we do on weekends while the latter when we have to get ready for work. This attempt at extending our feeling of well-being has nothing to do with these two common divisions of our daily week or once they are under way. It comes before them both and ideally is meant to inform our waking hours with a presence that usually is absent when events start to color the rest of the day.

More people than we think are inclined to take advantage of the early morning hours in order to set the course of the coming day. That time is private, not open to sharing, though often it comes up in conversation, for people are eager to share what's most important in their lives. What could be more important than their experiences of In the Beginning? Along with this special time are those little rituals to get us going without which the rest of the day doesn't feel right. But these rituals are secondary to sensitizing ourselves to the beginning of a day because the early morning hours comprise an image of our primordial source under discussion here. In nature, early morning hours are marked by quiet and freshness, so the task is to incorporate both into our lives. Quite a few people are disposed to pray or to meditate in order to set the tone of the day. If you look at this activity objectively and search out the common denominator, it is marked by a desire to maintain the quiet as best as possible throughout the day. If that's impossible, then carry around thoughts of it which for many people is their only option. Of course, some days are better than others but overall the experience is a desire to achieve that end. The person engaged in this activity may not realize it, but already he is participating in The Beginning.

A common experience of anyone sensitive to this time of day is how transitory it is. Compare it with the evening twilight which seems to linger much longer than the dawn's twilight though I figure both are pretty much the same time-wise. It seems that as soon as you wake up, The Beginning has escaped you. That's why rising before dawn is helpful. You're still within the colorless hours of night and can prepare yourself better for that quick snapshot experience of dawn's freshness. Yet this fleetingness isn't a time of despair as any thoughts or dreams from the preceding night. The early morning hours do offer stability. Despite the reoccurrence of days, for example, we don't tire of welcoming them, for their freshness is a sign that something deeper is at work. In fact, exposure to this freshness is necessary to keep us going.

A beginning heralds something new which hasn't been conceived beforehand. In other words, the element of

surprise is present. Once it takes hold in our lives we refer to it constantly, for therein consists meaning. And meaning turns out not to be something we fabricate but discover as already present. That's the nice part about the morning or better, the pre-dawn hours. We don't have to invent anything to celebrate it because we participate in it naturally, allowing the approaching sunrise to inform us. We know this is true is when we find ourselves at the opposite end of the day, sunset. This can be a melancholy time, of moving from light into darkness, full of memories of things not accomplished and wishes left unfulfilled. At evening we reflect back upon the day. In other words, evening is a time full of memories whereas dawn is not. If the memories are good, they inform the night and therefore pass over into the following day.

If, with practice, a person allows himself to be informed by the dawn, he will be able to stand apart from negative influences throughout the day and intuit them as having the same sources as good influences. Obviously this takes time and rarely is perfected. However, achieving this perfection isn't the goal...what counts is the striving. Such a person is hidden, not an external source of inspiration, because he is grounded thoroughly in reality which is where his real influence lies...hidden and out of sight but very much alive. If we were to interview such a person later in the day, even towards evening at its completion, he would behave as at the dawn, carrying with him remnants of The Beginning experienced at dawn much fresher than the rest of us. He is more grounded in reality though we may not know it from external circumstances. Chances are that fate (using that term lightly) has relegated him to some obscure lifestyle not worth imitating. This exterior blandness is the natural correlation to his interior indifference to externals, a manifestation not of his attitude (for that smacks of self-reliance) but of his alignment with The Beginning as it's being discussed here.

With these introductory remarks behind us, let's outline the classic example in Western culture of a beginning, namely the first verse of the book of Genesis. It runs as follows: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." The noun for "beginning" is *re'shyth* which applies to the first of its kind, that which is chief and is closely associated with *ro'sh*, head as belonging to a person or the first in a given order. Everyone who reads these opening words knows what they are about yet cannot explain them, for they are beyond explanation but fully within our comprehension. Such is the genius of the author, traditionally Moses, the appeal of Genesis' account of creation. Should we examine his role as intercessor between Israel and the Lord first in Egypt and followed by forty years of wandering in the desert, we would appreciate better the context in which he had authored *ber'shyth*. As for the actual time and place when Moses composed the first five books of the Bible, we have no specific mention. However, it is easy to presume he did this towards the end of his lengthy four decades of wandering in the Sinai Peninsula. If Moses had been permitted to enter Canaan, the Land of Promises, he would not have composed the immortal introductory words of Genesis, let alone the rest of that book, including the four others which comprise the Pentateuch. Entrance into Canaan represented an entirely new epoch in Israel's history, outside the scope of Genesis.

The Genesis text opens with the preposition "in" or *b-* prefaced to *re'shyth* and presumes the definite article. Without addition of *b-* we would not perceive *re'shyth* as having a sense of place, that it's tucked away somewhere up in heaven inaccessible to us mortals or even some quasi-material realm where the divine and human or created haven't been separated fully. *Re'shyth* is neither and can be taken as a kind of adverb, of place-when and place-how, the latter intimately tied up with the verb "created," that is, by God. We know instinctively that before this

re'shyth nothing had existed. If we didn't have a starting point but allowed the "earth as without form and void" to govern our creation story, nothing would come of it and therefore we wouldn't have a culture. In fact, there seems to be no evidence that a society has built its story upon such emptiness which doesn't preclude it from acknowledging this primordial state. Also the preposition *b-* intimates that creation came into existence all at once or whole and entire, "in the beginning." This makes sense in light of the subsequent six days of creation followed by the seventh of divine rest from creation. Each day is presented as "day one," "day two," etc. which gives a reading different from if the adjective came first. For example, "day three" is extra-temporal whereas "the third day" would suggest a literal rendition.

Moses, the traditional author of "in the beginning," must have been present...had been "in" (*b-*) the beginning...in order to witness what had followed. For that we turn to Chapter Eight of Proverbs where wisdom speaks as a prophetess. Vss. 22 through 31 deal more specifically with creation starting with "The Lord created me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of old." *Re'shyth* is used but minus the *b-* of Genesis. Note that instead of the verb *bara'* (to create) Proverbs has *qanah* (to acquire) which the **RSV** translates as "created." So to acquire someone—and in the case at hand that refers to wisdom—means that this privileged person had existed at the *re'shyth* of creation, and the verse at hand reads literally, "way" or *derek*. As far as Moses as author of Genesis is concerned, he had been "acquired" first and then set "in the beginning" so he could put down what he was witnessing. Each of the six days of creation had *ber'shyth* prefaced to them, if you will.

The remaining verses of Proverbs Eight (23–31) reveal what we could call Moses' privileged place when God created everything, and they will be listed here to indicate what this meant relative to him being "in the beginning." As you go through these verses and see them as a whole, it is easy to see how they can apply to each of us relative to sharing this "in the beginning:"¹¹

-Vs. 23 has wisdom (Moses) being "set up" or *nasak* which refers to the pouring of a libation. Here wisdom is poured out, if you will, as a kind of offering at the exact moment when divine creativity came into existence.

-Vs. 24 has "I was brought forth" or *chul* meaning to twist, to turn or to tremble. Such *chul* occurs prior to the depths or *tehom* being made. This term is used in vs. 2 of Genesis' opening account as symbolic of chaos over which the Spirit or *Ruach* hovers.

-Vs. 25 has wisdom as having been brought forth or *chul* as in vs. 24.

-Vs. 26 lacks any mention of wisdom's presence since it follows from the previous verse.

-Vs. 27 reads simply "I was there" (*Sham 'any*) or literally, "There was I" which is dramatic in its simplicity and well suited for the occasion.

-Vss. 28 & 29 similarly lack mention of wisdom's presence since it follows from the previous verse. However, note that vss. 27–29 begin with "when" which in Hebrew is the preposition *b-* prefaced to the first word or verb and literally means "in." So we could take wisdom (Moses) as being "in" the creative act of all three verses: the heavens, the circle on the deep's face, made the skies firm, set the deep's fountains, assigned the sea its limit and marked out the earth's foundations. At the same time wisdom remained distinct from these created

¹¹ Also it may be helpful to look at the Wisdom of Solomon (LXX), chapters seven and eight which describe wisdom.

beings.

-Vs. 30 has wisdom as a “master workman” or *‘amon* which is more like an architect. It is derived from the verbal root *‘aman* (to believe, from which we get ‘amen’). *Shahshuhym* is the noun (masculine plural) for “delight” is found in the next verse and derives from the verbal root *shahah* (to stroke, to delight). “Your testimonies are my delight, they are my counselors” [Ps 119.24]. “Daily” is expressed by *yom yom* or literally “day day.” It is used with “delighting” or *sachaq* fundamentally meaning to laugh.

-Vs. 31 speaks of “rejoicing” or *sachaq* (used in vs. 30) and stated again for emphasis with regard to wisdom “laughing” or enjoying herself as an *‘aman* in vs. 30. It is used with regard to the Lord’s “world” or *tevel* or inhabited part of the earth which here is joined with “world” or *‘erets*, often associated with a particular spot (i.e., Israel).

Shortly after the six days of creation and one day of rest in the Genesis account, Moses speaks of the creation of the first man and first woman and how both were placed in the garden of Eden as their permanent home. After having been tempted by the serpent, they had been expelled² yet retained a lasting memory of their former idyllic home signified by the long spans of life the man had lived as well as his more immediate descendants. Each generation kept alive the memory of Eden and held out the possibility of return, but the further this memory became extended in space and in time, the more it became diluted. The life span gradually decreased until it attained what we’d call a normal one. Generations of people must have been aware of that, quite alarming, and feared that they had lost something irreparable. Would it continue to decrease until mankind ceased to exist altogether? This question haunted everyone in one way or another.

Not even the flood of Noah could extinguish a desire for returning to the garden of Eden which was more than nostalgia, a sentiment that continues to the present and expressed in various ways. If it had become weakened beyond repair, our recollective faculty would have nothing to recall, and we’d cease to be human. As for the more proximate generations after man’s expulsion, they had an especially strong recollection of Eden, almost haunting. They were with living memory both of Adam and his descendants (keeping in mind the span of life extending several centuries). After a number of generations we see construction of the tower of Babel which wasn’t long after the flood, a way for man to reach heaven on his own. Surely those closer to the first man must have counseled against it but to no avail. This was not the way of return to Eden. They may have advised considering the brief mention of Enoch as a viable alternative: “Enoch walked with God; and he was not, for God took him” [Gn 5.24].

Despite such calamities, the story originally composed by Moses persisted and reveals the power of those who had communicated it, for Moses had been present “in the beginning” and his position there was unique. His power of witness endured and was as fresh as could be. The original story of creation comprising six days, including one of divine rest, had special meaning for early generations simply by reason of their proximity to them. Between them and those days was, of course, was the creation of man and woman and their placement within the garden of Eden. Thus the garden was something intervening. That is to say, get into the garden and you’ll be close to the six days and even share in day seven when God rested from his creative activity. Then again, this isn’t entirely accurate.

² Note the literal reading of 3.24: “He drove out the man.” I.e., the Lord didn’t drive out the woman who remained within the garden of Eden. That means every time the man wished to approach his wife he had to do so through the mediation of the cherubim (cf. vs. 24) with him on the outside and she on the inside.

Proximity doesn't depend upon an attempt to reverse generational expansion but by sensitivity to the story itself. And this story laid out the pitfalls of presumption, the very real "bite" of the serpent who said "you will be like God" [3.4].

The garden of Eden image is one of the most powerful ones in Western culture, second only to the more universal "in the beginning" story. An outstanding feature is the lushness of a garden surrounded by a harsh desert which highlights its boundedness as a place set apart from threatening influences³. Everything about our knowledge of that garden derives from stories handed down over centuries of story-telling, and most are surprisingly relevant to our modern condition. Accuracy comes in part from the universal desire of each generation to return to Eden. However, the idea of a return to some primordial Eden is not the way to go, that is, backwards. This desire of a return is incredibly strong because it's rooted within our collective memories. Since memories exist in the past, naturally we're tempted to go there, again as going backwards. Hints as to this return govern, for example, Israel's exodus from Egypt and the establishment of a new nation. The motivation behind this perilous journey which took on the new form of the Lord's promise to Abraham is distinctly different from abiding in memories of the past because the motivation is distinctly forward-looking. And much later that became a model for the early Puritans who emigrated to America, a well-known example, which fits in with the modern notion of progress developed not long afterwards. But then there's the problem of what to do...how to comport yourself...once the place has been settled and the nation has been established. Usually that involves the danger not so much looking back to the past, even as far as to Eden, with the intent to inform the present, but of trying to retrace one's footsteps to that distant place.

So when you look back to the garden of Eden, you'll find the first woman (Eve) who, as noted above, had not been expelled from Eden, just the man (Adam). That means she remains there to this day which means her presence there has an inexorable pull on us all. She had been the one whom the serpent deceived and shortly afterwards duped the first man. Yet God chose to expel the man and retain the woman within Eden.

"In the beginning" is something we cannot analyze, how and why it came into being. Attempting to lay hold of it is almost beyond comprehension, like fish trying to become aware of the water in which they live. Perhaps this image isn't entirely inaccurate. The preposition "in" is inseparable for an understanding of the "beginning" which means we're "in" it at all times yet cannot grasp it. So we should distinguish between "in-ness" and "beginning..." play around with the two until suddenly they come together. Although we can never attain this beginning, we're driven towards it unrelentingly. And as noted earlier, this drive is rooted in the distant past—before the dawn of human history—and is built upon by succeeding generations, including our own. At the same time continuity of the story between generations is remarkably constant. We see this by the undiminished message of what it means to be "in the beginning," simple as that. Such is the paradox between remoteness and presence, rather unique in human experience, and forms a life long tension which requires resolution in one way or another. Unconsciously we can fabricate the presence of "in the beginning" within the present which means substituting images for its reality. Invariably these images are of a more modern invention minus religious affiliation. In short,

³ Nowadays this boundedness has lost its impact with the all-pervasive ability to access the media as through the Internet. So tuning this out means something different because it is not visible. At no other time is it more difficult to establish such a space.

mostly they are secular by nature. The secular nature of the French Revolution seems to be the first large scale instance where any reference to the divine is excluded vigorously. All subsequent secular movements which suppressed religion take their cue from there.

Another feature of “in the beginning” is that as the first cause it contains everything within itself in one form or another. Automatically talk like this makes one think of folks like Aristotle and later philosophers. Valuable as their insights are, they don’t impinge upon the reflection here which come mostly from the biblical perspective and personal reflections upon these initial words of Genesis. Chances are they follow a pattern similar to these sages simply because if we just sat down and looked at the text closely, we’d all come up with the same basic themes. That’s how basic to our lives are the words “in the beginning,” theologically or philosophically. Associated with the *re’shyth* of Genesis’ opening verse is the verb *bara’* (‘created’) which more specifically applies to cutting or carving out, and that implies something which had pre-existed. It would be incorrect to hold *tohu* and *bohu* translated or “without form and void” as pre-existing or even existing before God. It’s a way of saying that God began the creative process on his own volition and essentially did it from nothing. Lost in speculation about this is the element of play, of the sheer joy of creating, which seems hidden within the account. So for God to exercise his “cutting” action of *bara’*, it means he is acting as a craftsman whose task stretches out over a period of six days. Day Seven or the Sabbath when he rested involves more than taking it easy but an opportunity to reflect back upon the six days and later offering guidance to the newly created man and woman, if you will, in order to bring them to greater perfection.

When reading the creation account of Genesis one is tempted to say that which flows from the divine creative activity is a natural process, a manner of speaking we take for granted and tend to pass by without reflection. This, of course, is true on one level but not so essentially. God brings stuff into existence which results in that broad category we term nature. Fine, but never are we content with nature in and by itself. Should we subscribe to the “natural” point of view...so familiar hardly we ever give it serious thought...we consider our efforts to re-capture our relationship with “in the beginning” as reflecting backward as well as upward to that point where creation came into existence. “Upward” is added because we wouldn’t be content with achieving the first goal and really have in mind the second, God himself who traditionally is posited as being “above.” Actually this above-ness is endemic to all cultures and is the “natural” way to think of it.

A perfect image of this “natural” way is the tower of Babel in Chapter Eleven of Genesis which takes place after the passage of some generations following Noah’s flood which wiped out the entire earth. “Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth” [vs. 4]. The words “lest we be scattered” are crucial, the reason for this enterprise which is different from the more common tendency to attribute construction of the tower to pride. By the time “men migrated from the east” [vs. 2], they had a growing fear that the language they all held in common would fracture. For proof of this, all one has to do is go through Chapter Ten, the generations of Noah’s three sons, for “from these the nations spread abroad on the earth after the flood” [vs. 32]. Spreading abroad is synonymous with the decreasing length of years of human life, the real but hidden fear of the tower’s builders. So with the growing anxiety that soon Noah’s descendants would fade away to nothingness, they undertook their grand building project. The text mentions a city as well as a tower and presumably was constructed before the latter. Now the tower was situated dead center in the city around which all life would revolve and reach up to

heaven.

We could say that everything proceeded smoothly until building the tower; i.e., the new city posed no problem for God and would be like any other. But trouble was on the horizon with the tower's construction "with its top in the heavens." The text seems to imply that the builders were close to finishing their tower. If they did, an elaborate dedication would follow, supremely important with sacrifices and the like. Instead, the Lord was waiting for the very moment before the "top" or *r'osh* was completed, a word akin to the "beginning" of Genesis, *re'shyth*. This *r'osh* wouldn't be the completion of the enterprise but merely the commencement of the real task at hand, storming heaven itself. This intended take-over wouldn't be launched on top of the tower but within the city around which the tower circled, that is, through various rites of manipulation. In short, the tower would act as a giant radio beacon, to use a modern analogy.

What are the results of this attempt to reach, if you will, the *re'shyth* by means of the tower's *r'osh*? Neither destruction of the tower nor of the city but confusion of language, the thing feared most by the builders. If they couldn't communicate with each other, their building would remain incomplete, just like their city. The text runs: "Come, let us go down and there confuse their language that they may not understand one another's speech" [vs. 7]. The first words "Come, let us go down" most likely is along exhortatory lines, of the Lord saying to himself something like it's time to take action, so I will get at it right now. "Confuse" is *balah* which connotes striking terror and here pertains to "language" or *saphah*, more accurately as "lips," the agent through which speech is made and hence communicated to another person. Once that which is communicated is stricken, each person will not "understand" or better, hear (*shamah*) what comes from the "lips" (*saphah* again) of another person. *Shamah* thus introduces the possibility of deafness. Although the *r'osh* or "top" of the tower threatened to come into contact with the *re'shyth* or "beginning," any confusion or *balah* of speech did not take place there which you'd expect. Rather, the Lord descended into the city itself to effect confusion as opposed to sending it down from on high.

Such *balah* took place on the horizontal level, not the vertical one; of how it actually was effected, we don't have details. The Lord didn't wave a magic wand but made one person's manner of speech different, quite disconcerting to immediate onlookers, which spread rapidly. *Balah* implies a consumption, a wasting away, which in this light fits the bill of rapid expansion, more an infection. As for later generations, they sought to rectify this *balah* by further upward strivings, unaware that such direction is not the way to go. Compulsion to do this got the better of them. They forgot that the Lord said "come, let us go down" in order to confuse their one speech. Perhaps if people realized this, the *balah* effected in their midst would be temporary, and they would not have suffered dispersion which followed immediately as in the case of Babel (cf. vs. 8). Note that this verse says the people "left off building the city," not the tower. Of course, the tower wasn't completed, but mention of "city" indicates it was vitally important for the tower's success. On a brighter note, once this scattering took place—and the city and tower remained intact for all to behold as a lasting ignominious monument—Chapter Eleven continues with a genealogy of Shem's descendants which leads up to the birth of Abram. And with Abram a whole new chapter of history commences. Note that the genealogy of Jesus Christ in Matthew's Gospel begins with Abraham, not these earlier generations before and after the tower of Babel incident. He takes up what had preceded him and brings the traditional genealogical process to a new level, to his descent or incarnation.

The tower of Babel represents the natural tendency of human nature to ascend heavenward, of attempting to recapture that which it had lost. The motive is good—it's "natural"—yet gone about the wrong way, "head-to-head" or *r'osh-to-re'shyth* ('head' to 'beginning'), to juxtapose the two terms just discussed. Perception of a beginning starts with a longing for something that had been lost, even if everything else is fine. Something better than what I have now must exist, no doubt about it. Then follows reflection upon the source of this dissatisfaction, of why things aren't in accord with the beginning which lies in the distant past. This distance is no obstacle, that's how strong our desire is to recapture it, for if I succeed, the future will be secure. Besides, if I control the past, I have control over the future. So despite all the talk we hear about the future, the past is the dimension of real concern to us.

The tower of Babel story is interesting from another point of view, that is, the lineage of those who built it and founded the city around which the tower became its center. These people had "migrated from the east...and found a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there" [vs. 2]. The descendants of Shem, Ham and Japheth, sons of Noah, lived in close vicinity to where the ark had landed after the flood. The generations listed in Chapter Eleven succeeded each other and after a while became too concentrated in one spot, hence the pressure to migrate. East was the direction they chose because "the Lord god planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed" [2.8]. Thus east was the direction that gripped their imagination, the place where the first man and first woman had dwelt in communion with God. Something about the plain in Shinar must have appealed to these migrants, that it was the actual site of the garden of Eden or close by it. After all, Shinar was the kingdom of Nimrod, "a mighty hunter before the Lord" [10.10], so if the migrants could repossess Shinar, they would be in Eden itself. Nimrod was obviously the closest connection they had. Attention is to be put upon this migration which essentially is movement from one place to another along a horizontal plane. Once they came to a stop (Shinar), they began their construction project "lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the earth." Following this horizontal migration the people decided to "migrate" upward, that is, to change it to a vertical direction. It was as though they were moving along...migrating...from the ark's original resting place when suddenly they halted as before a wall, and that wall was of their own making, the tower. To advance further would be like falling off the face of the earth, so later when the Lord scattered them, it was quite horrifying.

If it were possible to step outside this fixation on recapturing some long-lost bliss depicted by the descendants of Noah's three sons, we might discover that our efforts at storming heaven have no basis in reality. The reason? Our intention isn't bad. It's natural, and everything natural is just fine and not subject to questioning simply because it's just there. So why the longing for a distant past which holds the key for future happiness? This may be put in terms of why we, descendants of Noah, migrated from the ark and decided to build a city and tower? We've decided to undertake a journey ostensibly to avoid overcrowding and end up on a plain, flat and colorless. Yet after being encamped on that plain a while, it turns out to be quite satisfactory: flat and stable with the prospect of constructing a tower which will be visible for miles around. This spot turns out not to be a meeting of the horizontal and vertical realities as originally intended but a sudden clash of opposites. Even before constructing the tower to reach heaven its builders knew their project was already doomed, but nobody would dare say that.

This clash in the intersection between horizontal and vertical migration reveals that the very essence of our drive is

misdirected...not that the realm of the natural is wrong, but it has no relevance to our ultimate quest for “in the beginning.” That means we must look elsewhere, but looking elsewhere than the natural sounds like an impossible task, if not an exercise in absurdity. Before taking a step outside what we consider natural we need some assurance that our destination which had been conceived in “natural” terms does indeed exist, that it isn’t a phantasy of our imagination. This flies in the face of rock-solid knowledge that we did have a beginning and plenty of reliable, consistent stories from many cultures to back it up. One way to get started on a new track is to project ourselves back “in the beginning” in our imagination and to have faith in this process. If we come up with something plausible, it might work in reality. A good way to start is with the preposition “in” or *b-* prefaced to *re’shyth*. That means we see ourselves right in the middle of this *re’shyth*, not outside it. If we hang around in there for a while we discover that never have we left, and that we’re carrying around *re’shyth* with us right now.

With some practice through the exercise of our imaginative faculty we discover a new dimension which comes upon us suddenly, not by stages. The reason for its suddenness is well, that this dimension is not natural, and the natural usually works gradually. Even though this new realm makes its presence felt we can miss it or even more plausibly, miss it completely...totally. We’re dealing with something entirely other, that which we posit as *normal*, and hence sets the norm or standard for everything else. That’s what it does and allows everything else to flow...naturally. A norm in this sense is self-contained yet not isolated somewhere up there, and has a movement downward which is contrary to the natural one of ascension.⁴ Moses, the traditional author of Genesis, was in such a position to appreciate this. That’s why he could record God saying in the tower of Babel story “Come, let us go down and confuse their language.” This is far better than him formulating a story of the Lord effecting confusion by a gesture from on high. In other words, Moses was “in (*b-*) the beginning” right from the start. Since this in-ness is eternal and divine, it exists within the present and experiences no alteration which means no stiffness nor disembodied existence. If such were the case, the story of Genesis would lack appeal. Practically speaking, a person who makes the switch from natural to normal is not thinking in terms of beginning. Rather, he tends to substitute the word “maturity” which has been gained by making many false starts. Such maturity is born from a string of humiliations and finally coming to a point of desperation from which there’s no place to go, no tower to build or the like. The courage involved is great, but it primes us for being “in the beginning.”

Reflection upon this transition from what is natural to what is normal leads to a discovery of that which falls outside our familiar human resources. Such discovery comes about through a process of discovery we may term initiation. This is quite difficult to articulate on the natural level because it involves a rupture of sorts with the natural flow of things. The word “initiation” is similar to “beginning” and is apt for this critical shift to understand

4 There is a form of descent very different from the divine one which is all too familiar. St Bernard of Clairvaux designates it by the Latin noun *curva* (curve) or more properly an arc. And this arc is a slow, gradual curve downwards as he describes in the following two excerpts from his **Commentary on the Song of Songs**:

God indeed gave man an upright stance of body, perhaps in order that this corporeal uprightness, exterior and of little account, might prompt the inward man, made to the image of God, to cherish his spiritual uprightness; that the beauty of the body of clay might rebuke the deformity of the mind. What is more unbecoming than to bear a warped mind in an upright body (*Quid enim indecentius, quam curvum recto corpore gerere animum?*) 24.6

Therefore to pursue and enjoy the worldly warps the soul, while, on the contrary, to meditate on or desire the things that are above constitutes its uprightness. (*Ergo quaerere et sapere quae sunt super terram, curvitas animae est et, e regione, meditari aut desiderare quae sursum sunt, rectitude*) 24.7

the latter term in terms of “head” or fountainhead,” the basic meaning of *re’shyth*. The chief advantage of initiation is that it does away with one of the most bothersome questions of them all, how to handle the passage of time which in the lives of many people drags on relentlessly. For some Christians, especially Catholics, there’s an inbuilt presumption that we must suffer instead of recovering upon our original nature, of being commensurate with “in the beginning, and the passage of time is part and parcel of this suffering. At least if you’re suffering, you’re engaged in a worthwhile enterprise which will have a reward at some distant point in the future. However, suffering is more appropriate as transpiring on the natural level. Perhaps those who erected the tower of Babel felt anxiety on the natural level when they undertook their project and exclaimed “lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the earth.” Such anxiety arises out of fear of losing their one language, that which holds them all together. As far as we know, these people lacked a more explicit knowledge of their relationship with God watered down through that lengthy list of generations which comprises Chapter Ten of Genesis. This gradual alienation in terms of forgetfulness threw them back upon their own resources, hence the building of the city and tower without reference to the Lord. So when he did intervene by coming down and confusing their language, the one thing they dreaded the most, they were pretty much lost. It took the same amount of generations in Chapter Ten to reach the point of Abram’s birth and the intervention of God in his life. So when God said to Abram “I will make of you a great nation” [12.2], he had more in mind than restoring that “one language and few words” [11.1]. Instead of a tower and city, the Lord had in mind extension of Abram’s descendants, and that was taken up and perfected by Matthew’s genealogy as noted above.

The initiation process with regard to *re’shyth* described above, especially our being “in” (*b-*) it (i.e., ‘in the beginning’), reaches a new level with the opening words of John’s Gospel, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” The Greek parallel to the Hebrew *ber’shyth* is *en arche*. *Arche* means beginning or origin as well as the first place in terms of sovereignty and power. Within (*en*) this *arche* dwells the *Logos* or expression of God implying something he has uttered instead of created as with the case of Genesis.

John’s opening verse continues with “and the Word was with God” where the preposition *pros* is used signifying direction towards—which and hence intimates something always in motion. That suggests that the *Logos* as uttered by the Father always is in motion towards him, such motion occurring within *arche*, not outside it. To speak like this at first seems to be a contradiction because that which is eternal doesn’t move (or so traditional theology says). However, if we take both the *Logos* and Father not so much as entities but as different forms of the same love or awareness, the use of *pros* does make sense. Such activity taking place *en arche* doesn’t mean *arche* is larger than both divine persons but is the context in which the two carry it out. Finally we have “and the Word was God.” Note that vs. 1 contains three instances of the past tense: “was the Word,” “was with God” and “was God.” It seems that without mention of *en arche* there would be no need to employ the past tense, using the present instead. Thus *en arche* function as a reference point of the Word’s eternal relationship with the Father which he leaves, if you will, to become man. Thus this *en arche-logos-pros ton theon* sets the stage for a transition or better, a fulfillment, of Genesis’ *ber’shyth*. Just as the migrants from the east had settled in Shinar and constructed a city and tower without reference to God, so lack of understanding what *pros* on behalf of the *Logos* means relative to *en arche*, confusion results “that they may not understand one another’s speech.” And because *Logos* means “word” as expression, the new confusion that sets in is lack of seeing or more accurately, an ability to accept that

this expression is constantly in the direction towards (*pros*) God.

Several times earlier reference had been made to Chapter Ten of Genesis, the lineage from Noah's three sons to those who "migrated from the east." The same applies to after the confusion of the one language. We could even introduce earlier lists of generations such as Chapter Five, Adam's descendants. Such was the high value placed upon lineage, a way of creating historical connection with the past. The list of past generations is intended, of course, to continue into the future indefinitely, and to step outside this process is unthinkable, just as terrifying as the prospect of losing that "one language and few words." It is only natural to think this way, even in modern times, or perhaps more so since the ancients always fell back on some kind of divine order. Today no such fall-back mechanism is in place.

Introduction of "In the beginning was the Word" and so forth intimates a wholly different order of things. We could call it the commencement of the *normal* order where something hitherto unfamiliar or non-natural has been introduced. This was partly true with the *ber'shyth* of Genesis which deals with six days of creation closely allied to their divine source and followed by day seven when God rests, implying that the other six days rested along with him. Then along comes the *en arche* of John's Gospel which introduces that wholly new order and sets up a brand new norm by which things natural are held accountable.⁵ Maybe this apparently reverse order has contributed to making Christianity unpalatable. To persecute the order...the norm...is the right thing to do as Jesus intimates when speaking of familial divisions: "in one house there will be five divided, three against two and two against three; they will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against her mother (etc.)" [Lk 12.52-3]. Such is the result of that "fire" (cf. vs. 49) Jesus casts upon the earth.

What's so disconcerting about this new norm is that perception of it does not arise from below to above, from earth into heaven, like the tower of Babel. We've grown accustomed to conceive of striving upward in our anti-gravitational efforts to attain *re'shyth*. It cannot be otherwise or so we think. Then from out of nowhere come the words "In the beginning was the Word (etc.)." They are so remarkable, really, that a person couldn't dream them up...not even Moses, traditional author of Genesis, the one responsible for recounting *ber'shyth* in the first place. Now emphasis is taken off human upward striving ('Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower') to the *Logos* bringing his "*pros* relationship" with the Father into human history...in sum, a descent. Why that fact is so difficult to accept despite many reassurances, is an enigma. Yet it does show how ingrained within human nature is the natural order of things when it comes to divine things. So just like the lengthy list of generations mentioned before the settlers on the plain of Shinar as well as after them, so is the upward striving to heaven in an attempt to recapture "in the beginning."

These reflections upon two types of beginnings, *ber'shyth* and *en arche*, reveal our innate fascination with border areas and even thresholds. That which is mine and that which is yours easily can be extended to a family, tribe or nation and thus results in conflict. "Mine" leaves off where "yours" picks up. The Romans had Janus as their god

⁵ The first two verses of John deal with *en arche* vis-a-vis the *Logos* whereas the *ber'shyth* of Genesis deals with *bara'* or creation. In the former, creation takes a second-seat, if you will: "all things were made through him." These words set the proper order: first the *Logos* and second, creation or first (not temporally) *pros ton theon* and second, *bara'*. The task at hand, if you will, is to put the temporally first order second and the temporally second order first.

for borders, endowed with two faces and thus the ability to look in two directions simultaneously. This division between what is mine/ours and yours/theirs has a modern counterpart, albeit without hostility, that can be experienced readily, provided one is sensitive to such matters. Take the property belonging to an enclosed monastic order. Monks reside within the enclosure and must receive permission to exit it. In many instances the monastic property is situated in rural areas where the only physical distinction between the enclosure and property nudging up to it are “posted” signs. While marking borders is common, there’s a subtle but palpable difference between the land within the enclosure and the land outside it. Now the landscape itself is continuous and makes no distinction between enclosure and outside the enclosure. However, there’s a distinct difference between the two if you stand where they meet, all this smack in the middle of the woods or the border of a field away from direct human influence. While physically standing within the enclosure land for a while and then crossing over the border to the “secular” land, you get the feeling of traveling not just from one space to another but in terms of one time to another. The enclosure land is protected in the sense of being sacred whereas the “secular” land isn’t. It lacks that special protection. Over the years quite a few visitors have noticed this difference, so it must have some validity. Some even have spend lengthy periods of time right at the edge to heighten their experience, even placing one foot within “secular” land and keeping the other in the enclosure. In this way they could feel the two realities in themselves. The way of keeping time in the “secular” land is the clock whereas the enclosure employs the liturgical hours from pre-dawn to just past sunset...in other words, the Divine Office.

Several paragraphs above insight concerning “in the beginning” was put in terms of initiation which, in turn, intimates a rite or ceremony. “Initiation” is used rather loosely because of its similarity to beginning, a human expression of it, if you will. Try as we may to attain “in the beginning,” it is bound to fail. Not because of some cruel, invisible divine master but because of the radical difference between what is natural and what is normal or nature and norm. However, the sure-fire sign that initiation has taken root within our lives is a growing sentiment of gratitude. That comes from nowhere, really, and more wondrous when it arises from less than desirable circumstances. We’re dealing with a genuine mystery here, not a secret, for anything of the latter belongs to the natural realm. For example, instructions may be called secret but not mysterious as with the case of gratitude. Part of the appeal of gratitude is that it deals with *both* “in the beginning” and what lies after it, quite remarkable. Gratitude makes the all too common waiting period experiences in life short, even fly by, in an awareness that is full and mysterious (not secret!). Such waiting is revealed as temporary while at the same time allowing a peep around the corner, after “in the beginning” has burst forth. And that forward motion is as noted in conjunction with the opening words of John’s Gospel, “with or *pros* the Father.”