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Following the great liturgical hymn of Creation with which the book of Genesis opens, comes, surprisingly enough, what seems to be a duplicate account of the same event. Quite clearly the second Creation story was not written by the author of the first. The style is quite different. In chapter one there is a magnificent restraint in the description of God's creative acts. The process is sketched rather than described in detail. God is pictured as the great Original, who utters the divine fiat and his will is done.

By contrast, the second Creation story reads like an old-fashioned fairy tale. God moulds man like a potter (2:7), plants a garden (2:8), strolls in it of an evening (3:8), and makes clothes for Adam and Eve (3:21). The process of Creation is different, as is the order in which the various items appear. The first story begins with the creation of light (1:3) and ends with the creation of man (1:26), while the second begins with the creation of man (2:7) and ends with the creation of woman (2:22).

As long ago as 1753, Jean Astruc, physician to Louis XV, reached the conclusion that there were two separate narratives of Creation, from two different sources, and dating from two different periods. He further saw that these two elements were not confined to the Creation story, but that they could be traced right through the book of Genesis and beyond it. Since Astruc's day, scholars have consistently confirmed his theory and developed it. As we shall see, two further strands are added, one beginning at Gen. 15, and the other appearing in the book of Deuteronomy. These four strands, whether they were written documents or made up of fragments of oral tradition, were woven together to form the Pentateuch, the name given to the first five books of the Old Testament.

It is important to recognise that two of these strands are present in these early chapters of Genesis. They account for the contradictions and inconsistencies in the stories of the Creation and the Flood and elsewhere. The older source, which refers to God as 'the Lord', and can thus be easily detected, is responsible for the vivid lively narratives, while the younger source, which refers to God as 'God', is more concerned with genealogies, details of ritual and ceremonial. The older source, probably dating from the ninth century B.C., is generally known as J or Jahwist, from the name it gives to God, Jahweh (Jehovah), blended in places after Gen. 15 with another version, the E or Elohist tradition, whereas the younger source is for obvious reasons called P or the Priestly source, and dates roughly from the fifth century B.C.

In the Creation story, then, the editors have incorporated two accounts: first, the liturgical poem in chapter one (P), and then the older traditional narrative in chapters two and three (J). That should help us to understand that we cannot dismiss the second Creation story as a fairy tale, or merely as a primitive attempt to answer such questions as: Why the world? Why are there men and women? Why do we wear clothes?

The second story is clearly meant to be regarded as a sequel to the first, and not as a repetition of it. Its inclusion cannot be justified unless it has something to add. When we examine it, it emerges that far from this being a naive account of the origin of things, such as would be produced at a primitive stage of civilisation, it is in fact as highly theological and profound in its insights as is the first story. It is no more to be taken scientifically or literally than its predecessor, but it has certainly to be taken seriously. For having painted the picture in Gen. 1 of the world as God meant it to be, the Bible goes on now in Gen. 2-3 to paint a picture of the world as it is.