# Sermon 1 - on the First Day

Severian of Gabala (d. after AD 408)

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**SEVERIAN OF GABALA ON THE CREATION OF THE WORLD.**
[Translated by J. Bareille]

**SERMON 1.**
On the first day of Creation.

1. There is no subject of piety that does not produce edification of our souls, and it is to procure our salvation that all the teachings of religion combine. Salvation, this is what is wrought by the word of God, which the law of Moses commands, which the spiritual language of the prophets preaches, which the apostles proclaimed without ceasing. Everything is for us, all is directed to us, so that, working in every way to our improvement, we may acquire true piety. As I said earlier, there is no holy book that does not have as its purpose the salvation of our souls. However, this book on the creation of the world is the principal, the source and foundation of all that contain the law and the prophets. If a building can not exist without solid foundations, the various things created also can not shine in all their glory if the creation was not in the beginning. I know that many of our holy Fathers have treated this subject of the creation of the world, they said on this some great and beautiful things, according to the measure of grace which the Holy Spirit dispensed to them. However numerous, great and admirable may have been their considerations, we should not keep silent for that, and not expose the thoughts the grace of the Spirit suggests to us. Just as our predecessors were not silent out of respect for those who preceded them, so we will not do so for the sake of authors belonging to previous generations;

especially more so as for us as for them and their predecessors, it is one and the same grace that gives us the power of the divine Spirit. ”All these things,” it is written, ”are the work of one and the same Spirit, who distributes to each as he wishes.”. So, without rejecting what our fathers have said, we will set out our own thoughts. Although their work is great and ours small, we will all compete in building the same building. If a large stone used in a construction starts to move, a small stone placed underneath will suffice to strengthen it; likewise the teaching of our forefathers, joined by our feeble additions, ensures the expansion of the edifice

of the Church. I beseech your charity to consider especially the foundation of our discourse; look, not whether the thoughts are new, but whether they are solid; for what is old is not always true for all that, and what is new is not thereby always false: in all circumstances it is necessary to search whether what is advanced is true or an error. What I am asking is not to accept without our language without hesitation, as a friend would do, or reject it because of what may be strange, as would an enemy, but that you always ask whether our words are the truth.

2. ”In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. This story is the work of the legislator Moses and a revelation of the Holy Spirit. It describes the creation of the world carried out by the power of God, in which Moses had been instructed by a revelation and a prophetic grace. For Moses, in this book does not speak as a historian, but as a prophet: what stated he did not see, what he says, he did not witness. We have previously distinguished three kinds of prophecy: one in word, another in deeds, another both in word and deed: similarly, we distinguish three specific types of it today: one concerning the present, another the future, the third the past. Thus a prophet, Isaiah for example, was not present at the events that happened in the time of Moses, but as the spirit of Moses was in him and revealed them to him, Isaiah spoke of them as a prophet. Similarly, for prophecy concerning the present: for example, when in the presence of a prophet someone is trying to conceal something and the prophet divines it, as happened to Gehazi, whose secret thought Elisha discovered and to whom he told the future. Moses prophesied of the past, as others did about the future, and that is why we must listen to his story, not as an ordinary story, but as a true prophecy, whose author is the Holy Spirit himself. What is the purpose of the prophet?

Moses suggests two things, to set forth a doctrine and to formulate laws. Although a legislator, he begins, not by setting out his legislation, but by recounting the creation. And why does he first want to show us God as the author and the ruler of the universe? It is because unless he first showed God as the author of the world, he could not establish his authority as legislator of the world: to impose laws on those who are not your subjects is tyranny, while it is natural to issue subjects the rules that they must follow. Also John the Evangelist does he not set forth the law of Christ after establishing His sovereignty in these terms? -- ”In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. All things were made by him and without him absolutely nothing has been made. In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. He came to his own, and His own did not receive him. Only after presenting him as the author and the architect of creation does he present him as the teacher and universal legislator.

Another element in Moses may be mentioned. The blessed Prophet speaks of heaven, earth, the sea, the waters and of the beings that come from these, why does he not mention the angels, archangels, seraphim, and cherubim? Because he

wanted his legislation to be in harmony with the circumstances in which he was living. He knew too well those to whom it was addressed, to a people recently come out of Egypt and instructed in the errors in that country about the sun, moon, stars, flowers, fountains, and waters. Leaving aside the creation of invisible beings, he only deals with visible beings, to teach those who worshiped them that these beings, far from being gods, were instead the work of one God only, so there was no need to discuss angels and archangels; that would instead have only fueled their disease. If, although they had not seen them, the Hebrews spoke about angels, still more, if they had been informed of angels and archangels, would they have taken them for gods. He therefore concerns himself with heaven, earth, the waters, mountains and all the beings that inhabit them, to lead his listeners to the knowledge of things visible than invisible, from the work to the Author. This was also the behavior of the three young men in Babylon. Finding themselves amidst a people hostile to God, in a country where the true God was unknown and idols adored, they sang in the flames of the furnace: ”Works of the Lord, bless the Lord. Why did they not say:

Angels, heavens, earth, fire, cold, waters, heat, etc.; why not list all the parts of the whole creation? To purify all creatures, all the works of the Creator, and not let in even a glimmer of godlessness. In the same way Moses, in the text quoted, wishing to extirpate from the Jewish way of thinking all the errors of Egypt, said that the heaven and the earth were created, thus bringing into the light the works and their author. ”In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.”

3. Lend me now your attention: one thing that strikes me is that John and Moses begin in the same way. ”In the beginning God created...,” said one; ”In the beginning was the Word...,” said the other. This language is appropriate in any case, and extremely accurate in the other. Isn’t it of the creation that Moses uses the term: ”made”; is it not of the Creator that the evangelist said: ”Was”? However, there is clearly a notable difference between these expressions, ”made” and ”was”. ”In the beginning God made. — In the beginning was the Word. God is, the creatures are made, as the Evangelists very pertinently signals. It said of the Saviour that he says: ”In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. This was in the beginning. In him was life, and the life was the light of men. Six times the sacred writer repeats the word ”was” to impress upon us the being of God. After announcing that he was, and that he came to be a servant, after speaking of John, he adds: ”He became man. He was God, and he became man. What if someone dares to speak about the Saviour in these words: ”The Saviour has also been made by him, he would be like the earth. Apply yourselves, I pray you. If a heretic speaks like this: The Christ has been made, He was not before being made, how could the Son prevail on the earth? For Moses also says: ”The earth was.

So if we understand these words: ”In the beginning was... of a genuine creation and not an eternal nature, the Saviour will be in no better condition than the earth. Both the Word of God was, and the earth was: only one was in the beginning, not having been made, existing from eternity, while the earth was created. Indeed, the historian does not say: ”The earth was,” before he said: ”In the beginning God made the heavens and the earth. He began by putting: ”God made,” prior to: ”was. We know very well, brothers, that these considerations are somewhat subtle for many; but it is right that in the days of fasting, while souls are more vigilant, we undertake higher subjects.

”In the beginning was.... In the beginning God made.... I proposed, in showing the identity of these two beginnings: ”In the beginning... in the beginning... to show you that there is only a single source for religion, and the same light that led the legislator has also informed the theologian. The two Testaments are brothers: they issue from the same father, and that is why they express themselves in similar terms. They have almost exactly the same appearance, the same traits. Just as there many points of similarity between two brothers, whom the same father brought into the world, there is the same close relationship between the two Testaments, whose origin is the same. In the Old Testament, the law appeared first, followed by the prophets ; in the New Grace, the Gospel is first and the apostles follow. Here we find twelve prophets, namely Hosea and others: then the four famous ones, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel. In turn the New Testament gives us twelve apostles and four evangelists. It is by brothers that the voice of God in the Old Testament is made known; because Moses and Aaron were the first ones charged to set forth the will of the Lord: similarly, in the Gospel, the first that were called were Peter and Andrew. There was only a regular grace, here a grace two times more precious. There the were two brothers were called Aaron and Moses ; here there are two brothers twice, Peter and Andrew, and James and John.

It was the intention of Christ to offer us an image of love in the Holy Spirit, and to make us brothers at the same time by feeling and spirit: in consequence he takes nature as a foundation; he joins to it the tender feelings of humanity, and with that he built the foundations of his Church. In the Old Testament, the first miracle that appears is the changing of the waters from a river into blood ; the first miracle that we see in the New is the changing of water into wine. But as this is not the time to push through this parallel, we will resume the proposed topic.

”In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” In six days God made everything. However, there is a profound difference between the first day and the following ones: on the first day, God made everything from nothing: starting from the second day, he made no more from nothing, and he merely changed as he wished the elements created on the first day. Now you who want to, repeat what is being said, give your consent then if you find it truth; condemn it, on the contrary,

if you do not discover then that it is the truth. And I will respond to your criticisms, especially because it is very easy for me to justify myself.

4. On the first day, therefore, the Lord created the raw material of his creatures; on the other days he gave them their shape and ornament. For example, he made the heavens that previously did not exist, not the current heavens, but the heavens which are above it; the other he made on the second day. He made the upper heavens about which David sang: ”The heaven of the heavens is the Lord’s. This heaven forms in a certain way the upper stage of the firmament. As in any two-story house, there is an intermediate stage; well in this building which is the world, the Creator has prepared the sky as an intermediate level, and he has put it over the waters; from where this passage of David: ”It is you who covered with water its upper part. So God made the sky which did not exist before, the earth which did not exist before, as well as the depths of the sea, the winds, air, fire and water. On the first day, the material of everything which appeared afterwards was created. Here someone may certainly exclaim: Yes, they will say, it is written that God created the heavens and the earth, but it is not said that he made the water, air and fire. And first, my brothers, it is not just a question of heaven and earth, it is question of what they contain. Similarly in saying:

”God made man from a handful of dust taken from the earth,” Scripture clearly indicates the whole man, yet it does not list his members and does not add: God made the eyes, ears, and nose; all the bits were sufficiently within the concept of man ; also, saying that God created the heavens and the earth, that embraces everything, and it indicates clearly enough the creation of darkness and the abysses. ”The darkness was upon the face of the abyss.” ’Abyss’ is used here to mean the great masses of water. However the Bible says that the abyss was created in this passage: ”Before he formed the abyss, before he created the earth. Therefore, the abysses were created. Regarding the creation of the air, listen to this: ”And the Spirit of God was moving over the waters. There is no question here of the Holy Spirit, because the created and uncreated are not put together; this means the movement of air. We read about this in the prophet Elijah, ”that he obscures the sky by clouds and by the spirit,” namely by the wind; so in this place the word ’spirit’ means the air. It remains to show the creation of fire.

”God said: Let there be light,” and fire was therefore created. The fire of the earth is not the only one that exists; the powers above are also of fire, and there are close links between the fire from above and that down here. However, why is one up there and not the other? God made the angels as spirits, our souls also are spirits, only our souls are united to bodies, while the angels have no body. But what we notice in our souls and in the angels is also noticeable in fire; the one above is separate from matter, the lower one is inseparable, the one above is close to the angelic nature as are our souls themselves, for if the angels are spiritual, our

souls are spiritual, according to these words of the three young men: ”Bless him, spirits and souls of the righteous; and these others: ”It is he who makes his angels spirits. But the soul reveals itself only through the body, just as fire through the means of tallow, brushwood or other flammable materials. That fire is of a foreign nature, the facts themselves indicate: many times, actually, we use the heat of the sun to light a fire, and we get fire, yet if the fire of heaven was of a different nature, how can it communicate to us the terrestrial fire?

Moreover, in heaven there is so much immaterial fire that, when Sinai was covered with flames one day, obviously the Lord had detached from the immaterial fire a chunk of it for a spectacle, as the flames were not fed by any fuel. So Moses said: ”The Lord has heard his voice from heaven, and he has showed his treasures of fire,” declaring then how the fire of Sinai was just a little in comparison. Consequently the stars, lightning, sun, moon are simply that fire, and fire of a similar nature to that of terrestrial fire. It’s not just in the words by which the lightning and the stars are identified, which participate in this natural resemblance, ἀστραπή and ἀστέρες, ἀστραπή and ἄστρα. In support of this affinity between lightning and fire, the Saviour said in his Gospel: ”The eye is the flame of the body, if your eye is clear, your body will be in the light. And elsewhere he adds: ”In this way, this torch will illuminate you by its light,” calling light of the torch light the light which it casts.

5. So everything was made, the fire was made, the abyss also, the winds also, the four elements as well, namely earth, fire, water, air. What he has failed to mention, Moses discusses later in a strange way: ”In six days, he said, God made heaven, earth and all things therein. For, just as he did not name all the members of the body, so he did not list all the creatures, although they were made at the same time as the universe. If the fire had never been given to the earth, we would not today get light whether from a stone or from wood, the rubbing of wood making flames. Keep up your attention! ”The darkness was upon the face of the abyss. Did the Lord create the darkness? you ask. This is, I know, a difficult issue, but since we are at a meeting where one part is listening sympathetically and where another would be glad to catch us out in a default, it is essential to examine this text in order not to give little, after promising much. So where does the darkness come from? God did not make it, it is said; he is the author neither of darkness, nor of obscurity. And first, what is the darkness? The shadow of heaven, answer a few. When the upper heaven was created, they say, as the stars did not exist, the earth was lacking in everything and the darkness covered everything.

But the upper heaven was bright and not shrouded in darkness and there was then no sun, moon, stars, it shone sufficiently by itself; and as it was over the earth, and it shone on it and illuminated it with its light, and the darkness could not come in. This is my feeling: the earth was covered entirely by water, and mist and dense

vapours were piled up above the water, as still happens today above the rivers; these vapours intercepted the light, forming clouds, which thickening produced darkness. The Scripture says that clouds produce darkness in this passage: ”And the sky was obscured by clouds.”

However we should not ignore the fables of the heretics. Some of them have dared to say that the darkness was the devil, the demons and the abyss. When God said: ”Let there be light,” it is of the Son that he spoke. So that not only is he his equal in dignity, but he is even older. This impious fable is definitely not worth repeating; if we have talked about it, it is to keep you informed of what was said. The darkness then was produced by clouds. Similarly, the darkness of Egypt did not come from the night, but from the obscurity that had taken the place of day. Likewise again on Sinai, the darkness which covered it came not from the night, but the obscurity produced by clouds. And finally the darkness that covered the earth when Christ was on the cross, was due to the interposition of a barrier between the earth and the light, not the onset of the night. So we must not touch the sacred texts without thinking.

”And the Spirit of God was moving upon the waters.” The term ’spirit’ means ’wind’ here, as in this passage: ”By the violence of your spirit, you break the ships of Tarshish;” a passage where the word spirit means clearly the movement of air. For do not imagine that the air is one thing and the wind another; the agitation of the air is what produces wind, as experience shows. Just a few sheets can stir the air, and by shaking them you can produce wind. To show that the wind is the air in motion, the sacred writer uses the expression ”was moving over.” To move over the world is, indeed, something that characterizes the wind. ”God says: Let there be light.” Why did Moses not add: ”God said: Let the sky be, let the sea be...., ” why in one case: ”God made,” and the other: ”God said?” With us, the word always precedes action, we say first what we want to do, and then we do it. This is what God began by doing: the world was made in less time than it takes to pronounce a word. When the Lord created matter by his power, Moses puts: ”God made.” When the Lord merely wants to embellish his work — and light is the chief ornament, — then Moses uses terms related to this purpose. The first of these works was light, and the last, man, so God made the first with his word and the last with his own hands, thus beginning and ending with the light.

6. How is man ”light”? Like this: light is what makes things visible. Now man is the light of the world. No sooner did he enter it than he illuminated you with the light of art, the light of science. The light reveals the wheat; the intelligence of man is the bread: the light reveals the grape; intelligence turns grape juice into wine: the light shows us the wool; intelligence transforms it into clothing: the light shows us the mountain; intelligence extracts diamonds from it. The Saviour, does he not call his apostles a light, when he said: ”You are the light of the world?” Why

does he call them that? This is not only to honour them, it is more to strengthen the hope of resurrection. Just as the light, disappearing into the night, does not vanish for good, and appears again after being hidden for some time, so man goes down into the tomb in the evening of his life, to participate in the blessing of the resurrection. ”Let there be light.” Moses affirms the fact of creation; in what way it happened, he does not indicate, he did not even know. That light has been made, I know without a doubt, he says; how it was made is a matter that I do not know. As the Saviour said to his Apostles: ”It is not for you to know the times and seasons which the Father has appointed in his power.” If it is not for us to know those times and those dates, how could human reason understand the Sovereign of time and the Creator of the ages? ”God said: Let there be light: and there was light.” O all holy and unlimited power! O ineffable wonders! ”And there was light. And God called the light day and the night darkness.”

Why this name for the day, ἡμέρα? The word ἥμερον designates all that is cheerful and friendly, hence the name of ἡμερότης to describe kindness and ἥμερα given to domestic animals. ”And God called the light day and the darkness night.” Why ”night”? Because night recalls man to the thought of death, of which sleep is the image. Know, O man, what you are. You are mortal, subject to the law of sleep; why do you worry about what is beyond you? Night means compunction; and this is why David said: ”Whatever you say in your hearts, weep it with compunction upon your bed.” Indeed, during the night, isn’t a man lying in a state that is neither life nor death? Ask the heretic: In what state is he? Is he dead or alive? If he answers, ”living”: how so, do you object, when he does not hear or speak or walk? And if he answers that he is dead, say this: But he breathes, yet he who breathes is not dead. On the other hand, he who does not feel is not living, so it follows that you do not understand your own views, and that you are worrying about something that is beyond you. But that is quite enough on the first day; see it is evening. However difficult the explanation may be, we have done our best to set forth what relates to the first day. To teach the faithful to understand more deeply what they have been told, and to seek further.

7. For we who are the children of sacred fasting, and amid bodily privations taste heavenly delights, let us apply ourselves to observing the holy fast. ”Sanctify the fast,” it is written. Is it we who sanctify it, or it that sanctifies us? It is for we who observe it faithfully that the prophet speaks this way. Similarly, when we say in our prayers: ”Let your name be sanctified,” we do not pray for the benefit of the divine name, which in fact is the source of all holiness. But because that name has been applied to us, since we are called Christians, of even the name of Christ, we say; ”Let your name be sanctified by us.” Everything must be holy for him who is holy; things which are not holy have no access to God because God is holy, and he love to recline among the saints. The heaven he lives in is itself holy; ”He will answer him from his holy heaven,” said the Psalmist. The angels also are holy, according

to this gospel word: ”The Son of Man will come in his glory with his holy angels.” The earth on which God is honoured is holy. ”He will destroy their alliance in the holy land which belongs to him.” David speaks of the holy court of the the Lord: ”Worship the Lord in his holy court.”

Isaiah describes the temple of God as holy. ”Your temple is holy,” he says again, ”and admirable in fairness.”The sheep offered him in sacrifice are also referred to as holy, although devoid of reason: ”Like your holy sheep in Jerusalem.” The Testament is holy. ”And he will confirm with many his holy Testament.” Jerusalem was called the holy city: ”…And over the holy city of our fathers, Jerusalem.…” Again, nothing comes to God which is not holy, which is why the Apostle speaks of ”the holiness without which no man shall see God.” We have abstained from bread, let us refrain from iniquity. You do not eat bread, do not devour the entrails of the poor, lest God say to you also: ”They devour my people like they devour bread.” You do not drink wine; don’t let anger intoxicate you any more, so that the legislator does not apply this text: ”Their anger makes them like serpents; — their life is like the breath of dragons.” When you have oppressed and forced the poor man to lament, he has been found eating bread before God in tears, and the Lord says about this; ”You cover my altar with tears.” Is God angry with those who weep before his altar, he who has said: ”Priests, enter and weep?” No, God is not angry with those who weep, but because he sees before his altar the oppressed, the orphans and widows. To show that it is these he is concerned with, he adds: ”With tears, groans and sorrow.”

We must also take a look at the spiritual offerings. The food of the soul is set forth, namely the word of God. Fasting sanctifies the body, the soul is corrupted without bread. Let the body the fast from sins; let the soul instead feast on divine teachings. You can not eat at the same time the bread of Christ and the bread of tears, it is Paul who tells you this: ”You can not sit at both the table of Christ and the table of demons.” Let whoever fasts refrain from food, but especially to refrain from sin. Every day the angels note those who set out to renounce greed, impurity, and iniquity. The angels take heed of these fasts, and God holds them in his treasury. As the officers responsible for receiving petitions addressed to the emperor, communicate to him all their information, so the angels of the Lord convey to the Lord everything that happens, certainly not to teach him things of which he is ignorant, but to perform the duties that their place in creation imposes. In my opinion, he who does not fast is incomparably superior to one who, while fasting, commits iniquity. I say this, not to disparage fasting, but to recommend piety. This is not a bad thing to eat; it is to sin. So the Lord has said justly: ”Does your father, while taking food, not do my will? — The fourth, the fifth, the tenth fast will be for you a subject of joy, contentment and celebration; only love truth.” Light is perceptible to us in order to proclaim the author of light. Evening has come to put an end to the course of the day. To a good beginning, let us add a good end. Do

not reject the truth; give ear to this advice from David: ”At the end, do not give in to corruption.”

May the God of light who enlightens us by his word, his law and his faith, by justice and by chastity; in Jesus Christ our Lord, through whom and with whom be glory to the Father and the Holy Spirit in the ages of ages. Amen.

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**Source.** English translation: an older public-domain translation as collected in the Writings-Database (HistoricalChristianFaith), mostly from the Ante-Nicene, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers and similar nineteenth-century editions. SermonIndex has only divided it into chapters and short sections; the wording is the translator’s own. Square brackets, Greek or Latin words and footnote-free text are as the source file prints them, and a transcription error may remain. No Greek or Latin text is shown beside it yet, and no modern English version has been made.