

## Application to Genesis 1-11

On the basis of the metaphoricalness, the plasticity, and the flexibility of myths, we've seen that myths are not always best interpreted literalistically. Now we want to make application of these insights to Genesis 1-11.

When we consider the biblical narratives that are at the heart of our study, namely the creation of the world in chapter 1 and the origin and Fall of Adam and Eve in chapters 2 and 3, we are not in a position to speak of their plasticity or flexibility, since all we have is the final version of these traditions, frozen, as it were, in time by being written down. Nevertheless, we can certainly examine them for metaphoricalness. When we do, it seems to me, as I have explained before, that these narratives should not be interpreted literalistically.

First and foremost is the creation of the world in six consecutive 24-hour days – a description that doesn't require a knowledge of modern science to recognize as metaphorical. We've already seen reasons in our previous lessons to interpret the six days non-literally.

Consider in particular God's creation of the firmament. With the modern misinterpretation of the Mesopotamian and Egyptian cosmo-geography exposed, the main prop for interpreting the so-called firmament in Genesis 1 as a literal solid dome falls away. "Firmament" comes from the Latin translation of the Hebrew word *raqia*. Genesis 1 tells us virtually nothing about the nature of the *raqia* nor whether the word is being used figuratively or literally. The key to the meaning of *raqia* as used in Genesis 1 comes in

verse 8, where it says, “God called the *raqia* heaven (*shamayyim*).” *Shamayyim* is the Hebrew word for the heavens or for the skies. Thus *raqia* denotes the sky or, expressing the notion of breadth, the skies. That's what *raqia* denotes. The ancient Hebrews could not possibly have thought that the sky is a solid dome in which the sun, moon, and stars are embedded, for these heavenly luminaries were observed to be in motion – to move through the sky – and that's why Genesis 1 says they are useful to mark seasons and days and years. Moreover, birds fly across the face of the *raqia* (Genesis 1.20) and in the skies (Deuteronomy 4:17).

Benjamin Smith has probably given the best characterization of the denotation of *raqia* as, “the whole sky.” All that can be seen above the Earth from the surface, that's what *raqia* denotes – the whole sky; all that can be seen above the Earth from the surface. What that suggests is that the *raqia* is simply a phenomenal reality – an appearance. As John Walton very nicely puts it, there is a *raqia* and it is blue. It's just the sky! I think that not only does the figurative language of Ancient Near Eastern myths support a non-literal reading of the firmament, but Genesis itself indicates that it not best interpreted literalistically.

Next is the humanoid deity which appears in chapters 2 and 3 in contrast to the transcendent Creator of the heavens and the Earth in chapter 1. The anthropomorphic nature of God, which is merely hinted at in chapter 2, becomes inescapable in chapter 3, where God is described as walking in the Garden in the cool of the day, calling audibly to Adam, who is hiding from him. Genesis 3:8-9 state,

And they heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden. But the Lord God called to the man, and said to him, “Where are you?”

Read in light of Genesis 3, God's creation of Adam in Genesis 2 takes on an anthropomorphic character as well. Here God is portrayed (like the Mesopotamian goddess Nintur shaping bits of clay into a human being, or the Egyptian God Khnum sitting at his potter's wheel forming man) as fashioning man out of the dust of the ground and then breathing into his nostrils the breath of life, so that the earthen figure comes to life. We're not told whether God similarly formed the animals when, “out of the ground the Lord God formed every beast of the field and bird of the air” (Genesis 2:19), but we can't help but wonder if they weren't formed in the same way as man. When God takes out one of the sleeping Adam's ribs, closes up the flesh, and builds a woman out of it, the story sounds like a physical surgery which God performs on Adam, followed by his building a woman out of the extracted body part. Similarly, given God's bodily presence in the Garden, the conversations between God and the protagonists in the story of the Fall (namely Adam, Eve, and the serpent) read like a dialogue between persons who are physically present to one another. God's making garments for Adam and Eve out of animal skins and driving them out of the Garden sound again like physical acts by the humanoid God. Given the exalted, transcendent nature of God described in the creation story of Genesis 1, the Pentateuchal author could not possibly have intended these anthropomorphic

descriptions to be taken literally. They are in the figurative language of myth.

Could we take Genesis 2 and 3 to be a theophany akin to the appearance of God to Abraham at the oaks of Mamre in Genesis 18? There are examples in the Old Testament like Genesis 18 where God appears to a person in human form. Let me suggest two reasons, however, why I think that Genesis 2 and 3 are not as plausibly interpreted as a theophany than as figurative language.

First of all, the Lord's anthropomorphic qualities in Genesis 2 and 3 are not presented as a theophany is. Look at how the language of theophany reads in Genesis 18:1-2. The author says,

And the Lord appeared to him by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the door of his tent in the heat of the day. He lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, three men stood in front of him.

By contrast, in Genesis 2 and 3 you don't have anything of language of theophany like this – of God's appearing to Adam and Eve, looking up and seeing him in the Garden.

Secondly, I think decisively, in Genesis 2 and 3 God is described anthropomorphically even when he is not appearing to Adam. This is the preeminent case in God's creation of Adam. In creating Adam he forms him out of the dust of the ground and then he blows into his nose the breath of life, and Adam comes to life. This is clearly not an appearance of the Lord to Adam because Adam isn't even alive at that point, and yet God is described anthropomorphically. A second example would be God's creation of Eve. Adam is unconscious when this occurs. God puts Adam to sleep, and then he performs physical surgery on him to create Eve.

So, again, this can't be an appearance to Adam because Adam is unconscious. It seems to me that neither of these are appearances of the Lord to Adam and that therefore this anthropomorphic language is more plausibly interpreted to be figurative in nature and not to be taken literally.

Moreover, many other features of these stories are palpably false if taken literally. Here I'm talking about features of the narrative that the author himself would have plausibly thought fantastic.

For example, chapter 2 begins by saying that when God created man it had never rained upon the Earth. But ancient Israelites understood well the water cycle, as is abundantly attested throughout the Old Testament. In light of chapter 1's affirmation that God had separated the waters above from the waters below, it's hard to believe that the author thought that there was ever a time in the Earth's history when the Earth was utterly devoid of rain. Just as the waters below took the form of seas and rivers and springs, so the waters above took the form of rain. So an Earth which is replete with seas and rivers and springs (such as Genesis 2 describes) but without rain seems fantastic even for an ancient Israelite, given his knowledge of the water cycle.

Then there is the description of the Garden of Eden with its Tree of Life and Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. The Garden of Eden may have described an actually existing geographical location (plausibly the Persian Gulf oasis), but like Mount Olympus in Greek mythology that site may have been employed to tell a mythological story about what happened at that site. The idea of an arboretum containing trees bearing fruit which, if eaten,

would confer immortality or yield sudden moral knowledge of good and evil must have seemed fantastic to the Pentateuchal author. Keep in mind here that we are not dealing with miraculous fruit, as if God would, on the occasion of eating, impose immortality or supernatural knowledge of good and evil on the eater. For the fruit are said to have their effect even contrary to God's will. God did not want Adam and Eve to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and he drove them from the garden after the fall lest they eat of the tree of life.

Then there is the notorious walking and talking snake in the Garden. Now, he makes for a great character in the story – conniving, sinister, opposed to God, perhaps a symbol of evil, but not plausibly a literal reptile such as you might encounter in your own garden. For the Pentateuchal author knew that snakes neither walked nor talked nor are intelligent agents. Again, the snake's personality and speech cannot (like Balaam's ass) be attributed to miraculous activity on the part of God, lest God become the author of the Fall. The snake is not identified as an incarnation of Satan. Rather, he is described simply as the craftiest of the beasts of the field which the Lord God had made – a description which is incompatible with his being Satan incarnate.

When God finally drives the man and his wife out of the Garden of Eden he stations at its entrance, “the cherubim and a flaming sword which turned every way to guard the way to the Tree of Life” (Genesis 2:24). What makes this detail fantastic is that the cherubim were not thought to be real beings, but fantasies composed of a lion's body, a bird's wings, and a man's head. The Jewish commentator Nahum Sarna in his commentary on the book

of Genesis observes that the motif of composite human-animal-bird figures was widespread in various forms throughout the Ancient Near East, and he thinks that it is prominent in both art and religious symbolism, and that the biblical cherubim seem to be connected with this artistic tradition. Cherubim filled multiple roles in the biblical tradition such as symbolizing God's presence or God's sovereignty. Artistic representations of such creatures were to be found in the tabernacle and the temple, including in the Holy of Holies (Exodus 25:18-22; 26:31, 1 Kings 6:23-29). Sarna points out that they are the only pictorial representation permitted in Judaism, an otherwise anti-iconic religion. They don't violate the prohibition against images in worship because they are, "purely products of the human imagination" and so "do not represent any existing reality in heaven and earth."<sup>1</sup> Thus images of them could be made in ancient Israel without breaking the second commandment prohibiting images of things in heaven, for the cherubim were not real. And yet, here in Genesis 3, they are posted as guards at a time and place in history (along with a rotating, flashing sword) to guard for an indeterminate time the Garden of Eden against man's re-entry into the Garden. Since cherubim were regarded as creatures of fantasy and symbol, it's not as though the author thought, what realism would require, that the cherubim remained at the entrance to the Garden for years on end until it was either overgrown with weeds or swept away by the Flood.

So there are a number of features in these narratives which I think, if interpreted literally, would be palpably false in the eyes of the

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<sup>1</sup> Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, The JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), "Excursus 1: The Cherubim," pp. 375-76.

Pentateuchal author; which gives good grounds for thinking that they are in fact to be taken as figurative or metaphorical discourse.