

In our last session together we saw that there are many elements in Genesis 1-3 which, if taken literally, seemed to be palpably false thereby recommending to us a figurative interpretation. Chief among these certainly are the anthropomorphic descriptions of God which are incompatible with the transcendent God described in chapter 1.

In addition to these elements in the narrative that if taken literally are palpably false, we also have certain *prima facie* inconsistencies (that is to say, face value inconsistencies) between chapters 1 and 2 which were apparently of no concern whatsoever to the author of Genesis, such as the order of the creation of plants, animals, and man. According to Genesis 2:5 there was no rain and hence no vegetation on Earth prior to the creation of man. Genesis 2:5-7 says,

when no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no herb of the field had yet sprung up—for the LORD God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no man to till the ground; but a mist went up from the earth and watered the whole face of the ground—then the Lord God formed man of dust from the ground

According to this passage there was no rain and hence no vegetation prior to man's creation. But according to Genesis 1 God created vegetation on day 3 before he created man on day 6.

Some commentators have argued that there's really no inconsistency here concerning the vegetation prior to man because Genesis 2:5 is not referring to all types of vegetation; rather it's referring specifically to only two types of vegetation: thorns and grain. These are said to have come forth from the Earth only after

the Fall, as a consequence of God's cursing the ground. On this interpretation there was vegetation aplenty all over the Earth prior to man's creation, but there weren't any thorns and there wasn't any grain. Those arise only after the Fall. But I think that this harmonization is too clever by half. On this reading, the reason given in Genesis 2:5 for why the Earth had not brought forth thorns and grain should have been "for man had not yet sinned." Since the world was supposedly filled with vegetation at that time, the absence of rain and the absence of any man to till the ground had nothing to do with it. Moreover, man was commanded to till the Garden prior to the Fall – Genesis 2:15 gives him the command to till the Garden – which would imply that the growth of grain was not delayed until after the Fall. So I think it's far more plausible to think that Genesis 2:5 envisions an exhaustive distinction between uncultivated plants on the one hand and cultivated plants on the other hand, and therefore no vegetation at that time.

Similarly, in Genesis 1 God creates the animals prior to his creation of man, but in Genesis 2:18-19 God creates man before creating the animals. Genesis 2:18-19 state,

Then the Lord God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him." So out of the ground the Lord God formed every beast of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name.

It would have been very easy for the author of Genesis to bring the account of the creation of man in chapter 2 into accord with the account in Genesis 1 rather than to leave these apparent

inconsistencies concerning the order of the creation of man and the animals. The Jewish commentator Umberto Cassuto says that the author of Genesis could not have failed to notice what he calls “so glaring a contradiction” in the order of creation of the animals if such a contradiction exists. So Cassuto rejects the harmonizing translation of chapter 2 verse 19 as animals which “He *had* already created” as being unworthy of serious consideration. Cassuto assumes that cattle or domestic animals must have already been with man in the Garden, whereas the beasts of the field and the birds of the air, being wild animals, were not in the Garden. So what chapter 2:19 envisions is the Lord's creating what Cassuto calls “particular specimens” of these wild animals in order to present them to man in the Garden. So, for example, although there were crocodiles outside the Garden, there weren't any in the Garden and so God creates a specimen of a crocodile and lets Adam give it a name. There were hippopotami outside the Garden, but God creates a specimen hippopotamus in the Garden so that Adam can give it a name. There were lions outside the Garden, but God creates a specimen lion in the Garden so that Adam can give it a name. I'll leave it up to you to decide whether you think this is a plausible interpretation of the passage. The overriding point remains that were the author concerned with consistency he would surely have avoided such a glaring contradiction by making such a scenario as Cassuto envisions evident to the reader and making it a whole lot clearer.

Why was the author so blasé about these apparent inconsistencies? Well, plausibly because he didn't intend his story to be read literalistically. Given the plasticity of myths (and you will remember that refers to their variability and the way they could be

told), different ways of telling the stories were possible so long as the same fundamental truth was expressed.