

The Central Truths Expressed in Genesis 1-11

In our lessons together I have argued that the figurative language of the primeval narratives as well as certain inconsistencies within narratives in Genesis 1 and 2 make it plausible that these narratives are not to be read literally. The author has given to us stories of the creation of the world and of mankind's origin and rebellion against God which embody certain important truths expressed in a highly figurative language. Since the Pentateuchal author has an interest in history, he intends for his narrative to be taken at some level as historical – to concern people who actually lived and events that really occurred. But those persons and events have been clothed in the metaphorical language of myth.

It's probably futile to try to identify which parts of the narratives are mythical and which parts are historical. I suspect that mytho-history is more like coffee and cream than like colored marbles in a bag. Therefore, I think that the objections of someone like Kenton Sparks, who regards the narratives as completely unhistorical, to be unfair. Sparks demands, if the author of Genesis uses mythical imagery to describe the people and events, then which images are mythical and which are closer to historical reality? Did a serpent speak in the Garden? Was the first woman made from Adam's rib? Was there a worldwide flood? I've argued that images are plausibly figurative if they are inconsistent with what the Pentateuchal author says elsewhere. But I see no reason to think that the viability of a genre analysis of Genesis 1-11 as mytho-history should depend upon or imply the ability to answer such questions. The author simply doesn't draw such clear lines of distinction for us.

What then are some of those central truths expressed in the primeval history? The following ten truths come almost immediately to mind. I'll state each of them, and then I'll make some remarks on each one.

1. God is one, a personal transcendent Creator of all physical reality, perfectly good and worthy of worship. It is impossible to exaggerate the difference between the pagan myths of Israel's neighbors and this fundamental truth of these Hebrew narratives. The pagan myths of ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt are, to speak candidly, incredibly crude and morally vile, often disgusting. I realize that that is incredibly politically incorrect to say in our day and age. You're supposed to respect the myths and the literature of every culture and not to impose your standards upon them. This is some of the earliest literature in the history of the human race, and it might seem chauvinistic and arrogant for a modern Westerner to make a judgment like that upon these ancient pagan myths. But I take solace in the fact that the judgment that I'm making here is the same judgment that was made by the ancient pre-Socratic Greek philosophers of the myths that they inherited. The early Greek philosophers criticized the myths that they had inherited from antiquity because of the crude and primitive descriptions of the deities featured in them and because of the immoralities that these deities were involved in. They felt that these myths were not truly worthy of a proper concept of God. So my judgement that there is just a world of difference between these Hebrews stories and these pagan myths is not a result of modern Western chauvinistic mentality. Rather, it is a critique which could be and was exercised by my philosophical colleagues and predecessors in ancient Greece. This is a fundamental difference between the stories that

were told by these Hebrew authors and those that were in the pagan myths. In fact, when you place Israel in its ancient context, I must say I am just astonished – I'm bewildered – that they could have come up with such an exalted and noble concept of God in the midst of this sea of pagan polytheism. It almost makes you believe in divine revelation! Where else would they get this? It is so counter-cultural. So that is the first point – that God is one, a personal transcendent creator of all physical reality, perfectly good and worthy of worship.

2. God has designed the physical world and is the ultimate source of its structure and lifeforms. In this respect these Hebrew narratives contrast with modern naturalistic theories of the origins of life and biological complexity which do not see them as the result of intelligent design or planning but simply the result of blind physical processes. Here the Hebrew view is quite different in saying that there is a transcendent designer of the physical world and ultimately he is the source of its structure and the lifeforms that populate the biosphere.

3. Mankind is the pinnacle of the physical creation, a personal (if finite) agent like God and therefore uniquely capable of all Earth's creatures of knowing God. Man alone is a personal agent like God and therefore capable of having a relationship with God, something that none of the other creatures of the world are capable of doing. In this respect as well, the Hebrews stories are in radical contrast to the pagan myths of Israel's neighbors. In these myths the gods have typically created human beings to serve as slave labor for them – to do the back-breaking work of digging the irrigation canals and raising the crops. John Walton has put it very well when he says

these pagan deities do not *love* mankind – they *need* mankind. These pagan deities need man to feed them and to work for them and to do the labor that these gods don't want to do. They don't love mankind; they need mankind. Contrast the God of the Bible. He needs nothing! He's a transcendent, self-sufficient, Creator of all, but this God loves mankind and seeks out a relationship with him. So, again, we have a difference between these Hebrew stories and the pagan stories that is like night and day.

4. Mankind is gendered; man and woman being of equal value with marriage given to mankind for procreation and mutuality, the wife being a helper to her husband. Again, in our day and age, this is politically incorrect in identifying gender roles, though it does affirm the equal value of man and woman before God. But it's very interesting that in the creation narratives of man, midway through it no longer speaks of the man and the woman, but it begins to speak of the man and his wife. So it is talking about a marriage relationship and provides the fundamental basis for marriage in God's created order. This is God's design for human beings and for human sexuality – that sexual relations will be in the context of the marriage relationship.

5. Work is good, a sacred assignment by God to mankind to steward the Earth and its resources. Work is not the result of human sin. It is not the consequence of the Fall. Rather, prior to the Fall man is given work assignments to carry out in tilling the Garden, so that work is good. This is something that man needs. It is a sacred assignment that God has given to mankind to care for the Earth and the creatures in the Earth. So this provides, I think,

the basis for a proper view of the environment as well as a proper view of work.

6. Human exploration and discovery of the workings of nature are a natural outgrowth of man's capacities rather than divine bestowals without human initiative and effort. Again, this is in sharp contrast to pagan myths. In the Mesopotamian myths, advances in technology and arts and crafts and tools are gifts of the gods to mankind. They are not human inventions; rather the gods simply give these things to man to do his work and to live. In fact, there's one myth in Mesopotamia called *The Hymn to the Pickaxe* (or *The Ode to the Hoe* would be a different translation). This is an ode or a hymn of praise for the pickaxe that Enki (the god) has given to mankind to dig the irrigation canals and to do mankind's work. It is as though this is some great technological, divinely bestowed gift to mankind, and so the pickaxe is praised as this wonderful divine gift that the gods have given to man to do his work. By contrast to that, in the Genesis narrative what you discover is that various descendants of Adam and Eve are said to be themselves the discoverers of things like metallurgy, of music, of domesticating animals and raising livestock. These are not divine bestowals upon man; rather, these are the result of human ingenuity and invention. Of course ultimately the capacity to invent these things comes from God, but they are the result of human ingenuity and effort. I think in this sixth point we have the biblical foundation for science. This is the ratification of the scientist's quest to understand the workings of the universe, as well as the foundation for medicine and all of the sorts of explorations of the workings of nature that then are such a boon to mankind and

to civilization. So this is a sharp difference between the pagan myths and the Hebrew narratives.

7. Mankind is to set apart one day per week as sacred and for refreshment from work. This is the basis for the Sabbath commandment later in Israel. We're not to be working all the time; we're to take a pause every week from our work for refreshment and also as a sacred day for the Lord. This point would be in contrast with the modern view of work and the danger of workaholism.

8. The first man and woman freely chose to disobey God, resulting in mankind's alienation from God and spiritual death as our just desert, condemned to a life of hardship and suffering during this mortal existence. This, I think, is a central lesson of the Fall. Both parties are guilty of rebellion against God, of disobeying him, and this brings alienation and spiritual death. That is, I think, symbolized in God's driving them out of the Garden. No longer do they exist in the Garden in close fellowship with God, but now they're driven out of the Garden. This sort of alienation from God just is spiritual death. In the story they didn't drop over dead immediately when they ate the fruit, but they died spiritually in being alienated from God and then expelled from the Garden. That condemns them to a life of hardship and suffering. The curses upon the man's working ground and upon the woman in her increased pain in childbearing teach that this life is not meant to be a bowl of cherries. Therefore, the Christian isn't surprised when people suffer terrible diseases and calamities and accidents. This is our lot in this world until we go home to be with God in glory and receive a resurrection body that will be free from every disease and

infirmity. So we shouldn't be puzzled or bewildered at the horrible suffering and shortcomings of this finite existence. On the contrary, we should expect it because that is one of the central lessons of the story of the Fall.

9. Human sin is agglomerative and self-destructive resulting in God's just judgment. As you read the primeval history, sin goes from bad to worse, from the sin in the Garden to Cain's murdering Abel to the sort of rampant evil that precedes the Flood and leads to God's judgment. So this sin, in the words of the German commentator Gerhard von Rad, reaches avalanche proportions in the pre-Flood era and then is justly judged by God. So human sin is agglomerative – it accumulates, it's self-destructive, it destroys us, and it ultimately does result in God's just judgment.

10. Despite human rebellion against God, God's original purpose to bless all mankind remains intact as he graciously finds a way to work his will despite human defiance. One of the lessons of the primeval history is that even though people repeatedly sin and rebel against God, God always responds with a gracious alternative – at least a partial remedy. When Adam and Eve sinned and were expelled from the Garden, God provided them clothing to take care of them. When Cain sins by killing his brother Abel, God puts a mark upon Cain to protect him against revenge from others about him. After the Flood, God spares Noah and his family, so that creation can begin again. So again and again although sin is inevitably followed by God's judgment, God's judgment is always tempered by grace. The lesson of the primeval narrative, I think, is that God hasn't given up on his original plan for which he created Adam and Eve – namely, to bless all of mankind. That plan

remains intact. He hasn't abandoned it in order to bless just Israel, the elect people, the seed of Abraham. Rather, his plan is to fulfill the original intention through Israel. Israel is merely the means by which God will achieve his ultimate and original intent of blessing all of mankind despite mankind's rebellion and defiance.

So those are just a few of the fundamental truths which are taught by the primeval history of Genesis 1-11.

All right. Now, if what I've said is correct, then I think that we should not be turning to the Bible for scientific details concerning the creation of life and biodiversity, including the origin of man. Rather, we are free to follow the scientific evidence where it leads.