

§ 8. Doctrine of Creation

Lecture 2

Does Genesis 1 Teach *Creatio Ex Nihilo*?

Last time we began our study of the doctrine of creation by looking at biblical data in support of the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* or creation out of nothing. We began with the first verse in the Bible, Genesis 1:1, “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.” This verse appears to teach God’s creation of everything from nothing. But we saw that some scholars have tried to avoid that conclusion by taking verse 1 as a subordinate clause rather than as a main clause so that it reads something like this: “When, in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was without form and void and darkness was on the face of the deep.” It might sound as though creation actually begins with this chaotic, dark status out of which God then fashions the world. But I suggested several reasons for thinking that, in fact, verse 1 is a main clause and not merely a subordinate clause.

This doesn’t decide the issue decisively in favor of *creatio ex nihilo*, however, because other scholars have said the opening verse, though a main clause, is a sort of title for the entire chapter. It’s like a chapter heading that summarizes everything that is in the chapter. There were two arguments for taking this as a title. Let me refresh your memory about those. The first was that the expression “the heavens and the earth” is already an ordered cosmos. It is an orderly state, and so in this title or verse 1 you already have the creation of an orderly universe described. The second argument for taking it as a title was that God could not create a chaotic state such as described in verse 2. God is a God of order and he could not create a sort of lawless, chaotic state, and therefore this must simply be the initial state with which God begins. What you have in verse 1 is a title or a heading for the whole chapter.

We saw, however, that there is a decisive argument against taking verse 1 as a title or a chapter heading, and that is that it is connected to verse 2 with the Hebrew conjunction “and” – “in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth *and* the earth was without form and void.” When you have a Hebrew construction like this, the foregoing clause gives background information to the main clause. So this is not just a chapter heading. This is a description of what God did prior to what is described in verses 2 and 3.

So the question then is: how do we resolve those two arguments that we just reviewed for this being a title or a chapter heading? You’ll remember the first of these was that the expression “heavens and the earth” is already describing an orderly cosmos and therefore it cannot be prior to what happens in verses 2 and 3. This tension between verse 1 and verse 2 could be simply due to the fact that the author of Genesis took the traditional

material of verses 2 and 3 (as we saw last time) and then prefixed it with verse 1 which states creation out of nothing, and that he doesn't try to resolve the tension. He just leaves the tension to exist there. But the theological sophistication of Genesis chapter 1 might lead us to wonder whether or not there would be some consistent interpretation of this chapter that would resolve the tension. For example, suppose we take verse 1 to be universal in its scope – “in the beginning God created the universe” – and then with verse 2 the focus dramatically narrows to the planet Earth – “and the earth was without form and void.” Then the remainder of the chapter describes how God made the earth into a habitable place for man. So the tension would be resolved by taking verse 1 to be universal and then verse 2 to be much more narrowly focused on just this planet.

Moreover, the expression in the Hebrew for “without form and void” – *tohuwabohu* – does not connote a chaos in the Greek sense of the word “chaos” – a sort of lawless, disordered state. Rather, *tohuwabohu* in the Hebrew denotes a desert waste or an uninhabitable place. In the succeeding verses in Genesis 1 what is described is God's transforming this uninhabitable waste into a paradise suitable for human beings to live in. So what you have in verse 1 is the description of God's creation of the entire cosmos, and then from verses 2 and following his transformation of this uninhabitable planet into a habitable ecosystem for human beings to live in.

One problem with this interpretation would be the description of the fourth day in verse 14 of Genesis where it says, “and God said ‘Let there be lights in the firmament of the heavens to separate the day from the night, and let them be for signs and seasons and days and years, and let them be lights in the firmament of the heavens to give light upon the Earth.’” This might suggest that what we have in Genesis 1 is not just the description of the transformation of the Earth into a habitable place for man but also the creation of these heavenly bodies. So that would not be consistent with the interpretation that I've suggested. However, this difficulty ignores a very interesting duplex, or double-stranded nature, of Genesis 1. The expression “let there be lights in the firmament” in the Hebrew – the verb *hayah* (“let there be”) plus the infinitive – means let the lights in the firmament be for the separating of days and nights. It is unlike the earlier days where God says, “Let there be” and then it specified what God creates. Rather, what you have in verse 14 is a description of what the lights in the firmament are to be for – let them be for the purpose of separating day and night and marking times and seasons and days and years and so forth. In that case it already presupposes that the lights and the heavens exist. What is happening in verse 4 is simply a specification of the purposes that they should serve. Someone might say, well, wait a minute though, in verses 16 to 18 it goes on to say,

[blockquote]And God made the two great lights, the greater light to rule the day, and the lesser light to rule the night; he made the stars also. And God set them in the firmament of the heavens to give light upon the earth, to rule over the day and

over the night, and to separate the light from the darkness. And God saw that it was good. [blockquote]

So verses 16 to 18 seem to describe God's creation of these heavenly bodies and not simply a specification of their purpose. But, as I say, this ignores this duplex nature of the creation narrative in Genesis 1. Scholars have often noted that Genesis seems to interweave or inter-braid two separate creation stories. One, creation by God's word, and then another, creation by God's actions. For example, in verses 3, 6, 9, 11, and so forth, we have creation by God's word. Verse 6, "and God said, 'Let there be a firmament.'" Verse 9, "and God said, 'Let the waters under the heavens be gathered together.'" Verse 11, "and God said, 'Let the earth bring forth vegetation, etc.'" By contrast with creation by God's word, you have a second strand which is creation by his action in verses 7, 12, 16, 21, and so forth. In verse 7 it says, "and God made the firmament." In verse 12 it says, "the earth brought forth vegetation, plants yielding seed according to their kinds, and fruit trees bearing fruit each according to its kind." Verse 16 says, "and God made the two great lights." Verse 21, "so God created the great sea monsters and every living creature that moves, etc." So some scholars have speculated that what the author has done here is braided together these two kinds of creation stories – one by God's word, and another by God's action.

This is possible, but the coherence and the unity of the chapter as a whole might be more satisfactorily explained if we take this duplex pattern to be a pattern of report followed by commentary by the author. It is not two separate creation narratives; rather, it's the report and then it's the author's commentary on that. So, for example, in verse 12 that we read a moment ago – "the earth brought forth vegetation, plants yielding seed according to their kinds, and fruit trees bearing fruit according to their kind, etc." – doesn't actually describe something that God did nor is verse 12 meant to follow temporally on verse 11 because after God says "Let the earth bring forth vegetation, plants, fruit trees, and so forth," it says, "And it was so." So this already has happened in verse 11. So what the author may be doing here is reporting God's creation by his word and then giving his comment on it. Similarly, in verse 15, after God specifies the purpose of these heavenly bodies, it says, "And it was so." Then you have verse 16 and following, suggesting that verses 16 to 18 are the author's comment on God's creation of the heavens. God is the one who made the sun and the moon and the stars. These are not deities as Israel's pagan neighbors thought. These are just things that God made. God made the stars and the moon and the sun. It doesn't necessarily imply that these things were made on the fourth day. Rather, the comment is that these are things that God has created. Indeed, this would help to understand how there could be day and night prior to the fourth day. If the sun wasn't created until the fourth day then how do you have the three prior days? It was evening, and it was morning, the first day, the second day, and the third day. But if we

take the heavenly bodies to already exist prior to the fourth day then that would make sense of there already being day and night prior to verse 14.

It seems to me that if we understand this dual nature in terms of report and commentary, that would allow us to affirm that in verse 1 we have described the creation of the entire universe, and then in verse 2 and following the focus radically narrows down to the planet Earth, and what is described then is how God transforms the planet Earth into a habitable place for humankind. In that case, God's creation of the universe in verse 1 would imply *creatio ex nihilo* because it would be the beginning of all of physical reality. This is, I think, the natural interpretation of verse 1. If we're to take it in some weaker sense there would have to be powerful evidence in favor of that which I don't think there is.

START DISCUSSION

Student: Some people say that the way it would work was that since God created light before he created the light-bearers – apparently in the Hebrew, the sun and the moon are actually the light-bearers – if he was the source of the light, then all you would need is some sort of rotation to maintain an evening and a morning even if you didn't have the sun or moon. So if you had the planet and it was rotating then if God was the source of the light before he created the light-bearers that an evening and a morning could still be created that way.

Dr. Craig: Where did the light come from if there was no sun at that point?

Student: Well, it seems like God himself, God the Father, is described as light many times. It says in Revelation there won't be any need for sun, moon, and stars because he will be the source of the light.

Dr. Craig: I think it is very important that we not try to impose things on the author of Genesis from outside, whether modern science or from New Testament teaching. There's nothing in Genesis 1 that suggests that God is light. On the contrary, God creates the light. He says "let there be light." Prior to that was darkness. So God is the source of this in the sense of creating it, but God himself doesn't emit photons. Right? This would make God some kind of physical reality that seems inconsistent with his creation of everything.

Student: Would you agree that the description in Revelation though, it does specifically say that God is the light himself, so therefore the sun, moon, and stars are no longer needed and don't exist?

Dr. Craig: I don't remember it says they are no longer needed or exist. Does it say that? You are right that it says he will be the light of the people in heaven. It's talking about the glorified state in heaven. That is also, I think, a word picture in Revelation. It describes

things being like precious stones, polished stones, and so forth. I think we've got to be very careful about using these images in Revelation in a kind of literal way.

Student: When he differentiates between the sun and the stars, he creates the greater light and the lesser light, the moon, and the sun, and then he also created the stars. Materially, obviously, those are the same thing – the sun and the stars – however, because he makes a differentiation between the two, some people feel like that's evidence that the entire universe is focused on the Earth and the Earth is in God's mind the center of the universe, and therefore evidence that there is not intelligent life on other planets that need to be saved.

Dr. Craig: Wow. To me, that just goes so far beyond the horizon of the author of this narrative that, again, it's illegitimate to impose those kinds of concerns on him. Certainly it is, can we use the word "earth-o-centric?" Yes, it is. That's true. It's geocentric – maybe we should say the focus is geocentric – but it's because that's where we are! We look out at the universe from here – from our place – and see the sun and the stars and so on. So what's described here is how God has made the Earth a habitable, wonderful place for human beings to live on. I don't think it says anything, or contemplates anything, about whether there might not be other places in the universe that God has made where there could be life.

Student: If I understand correctly, we're talking about on day four it was just explained the purpose. So what was created on day four then? Anything?

Dr. Craig: No. It would seem that on day four there isn't any thing that's actually created. Rather, God would be specifying the functions of these heavenly bodies that already exist.

Student: So does that mean there's only five days of creation?

Dr. Craig: No, because on the fourth day he does something – he specifies the function that these are to serve. But it would mean that there's nothing that's brought into existence on the fourth day on this interpretation.

Student: On the speaking of the two natures – the speaking and the creating. I've heard it said he spoke and then his already existing angels created. He spoke and the Holy Spirit created. We can look at it one way, either way. Where do you place the creation of angels? Prior to this?

Dr. Craig: This is, again, a question on which Genesis is silent, I think. It doesn't tell us whether there was an angelic or spiritual creation prior to verse 1. Verse 1 describes the creation of the universe. Did he create angelic realms after this? Before it? Simultaneous with it? This is, again, a question that just doesn't seem to be within the purview of the author. Similarly with what you suggested about ascribing the creation to angels. That

just doesn't enter the picture here at all. There's no suggestion that God has delegated or given over the creation of these various things to angels. I think we've got to be really careful to let the narrative speak to us on its own terms and not try to read things into it.

Student: Why is there a description of the process at all? I am going to use the word process because I don't want to use the word incremental because the creation was not incremental. Verse 1: "In the beginning God created the heavens in the earth." Verse 2: "The earth was formless and void." . . . I understand it is there in the text, but what's really important is that God created everything. What's the importance necessarily of saying how he went about doing that? Why is it significant to, say, break it down by days? You could compress this and say, "God created the heavens and the Earth, and then he gave order to the Earth and put Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden."

Dr. Craig: Surely the answer to that question has got to be that early Israelites who practiced the Sabbath are looking back on this creation story as justifying having a day of rest – that God rested on the seventh day from all his works, and so similarly, we, Jews have a Sabbath day of rest during which we cease from our labor. So the seven day motif here is surely meant to reflect Jewish Sabbath observance.

Student: I think the purpose for this was communication. This is for us, not for God. The fact that he used his word to create (and says his word is eternal in other places) is a communicative aspect of how he did this. This is for us. This is why we observe the Sabbath. God could have just . . . he didn't need to speak it into existence. He could have just thought it into existence instantaneously.

Dr. Craig: I'm not so sure that addresses the question directly. I think that what I said would be more pertinent, but obviously the narrative is given to us to communicate to us what God wants us to know. These astral bodies are not gods and goddesses and that there wasn't a primordial material out of which God made the universe. He is the source of everything that exists apart from him, and these things that the pagans worship as astral deities are just lights in the sky that God has made. And God has made all the animals and so forth and given them to human beings. Then, of course, the nature of man as the lord over creation and steward of the Earth. All of these are important truths to communicate to us. You're quite right in saying that. But I think the question was asking for why there's a seven-day structure to this rather than just doing it all at once. I think that the answer to that would be that the creation week models the work week with the Sabbath day of rest at the end.

Student: I always have questions about the water. The next verse says the Spirit hovers over the water. It is formless and empty in the state of water. Where does water come in, and how does the Spirit hover over it?

Dr. Craig: I take it that what's being described here is a sort of primordial ocean that covers the land, and then God causes the dry land to emerge from the primordial ocean. It is not, as I say, a chaos in the Greek sense. It's just an uninhabitable waste. It's this primordial dark ocean out of which the land will emerge and then vegetation and animals will be created.

Student: So formless and void does describe this water?

Dr. Craig: Yes. Or the Earth. Yes, that's right. But I just don't want you to think of it in terms of a sort of Greek chaos which means a lawless state in which there's no regularity. A primordial ocean, obviously, operates according to natural laws and has regularity and so forth.

Student: I do think, such as Colossians 1:15-16, it says that Christ created (in other words, not angels). It says, *The son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation, for in him all things were created, things in heaven and on Earth, visible and invisible.* I think that clarifies these other stories that crop up that have no real basis in Scripture.

Dr. Craig: This would be the one qualification that one would want to introduce with respect to the earlier question. When you get to the New Testament materials, then quite definitely Christ is spoken of as the agent of creation. We'll look at some of those verses momentarily. But he doesn't appear anywhere in Genesis 1. This is a New Testament development.

Student: Can you comment on the genre of Genesis?

Dr. Craig: We'll talk about that more later on. This is a really difficult question. It is unique in ancient literature. Some have suggested it's poetry, but that's not right. If you compare it with the Psalms, it doesn't exhibit the kind of poetic structure that the Psalms do. It's not a hymn. But it's not just straight historical reporting either. It has a very stylized formal structure around these repeated phrases "and God said . . . and God said . . . and it was so," and so forth. So it is very difficult for scholars to determine exactly what kind of literature this is. Some have suggested that it's a creation myth in the sense of other ancient creation myths. But it definitely rejects a lot of the mythological elements of these pagan myths like the astral deities, for example, or the primordial dragons or semen or egg and so forth out of which the world was made. Here you have a much more elevated majestic account of creation. So it is not like, and doesn't borrow from, these other myths in a significant way. We'll talk more about that, but we'll just note for here that this is a really difficult question that you're raising. It will be important because that will largely determine how you interpret it.

Student: To me, you cannot read it as a scientific textbook on the creation.

Dr. Craig: Certainly not in terms of modern science. I think that's quite right. There are some Christians who will try to read back Big Bang cosmology or evolutionary theory into the narrative. I would just resist that stoutly. We need to read it from the standpoint of an ancient Hebrew author and his audience – how they would understand it – and not try to impose modern notions on this. Before we try to read in between the lines, we need to learn to read the lines. I think you're quite right. On the other hand, I think it is an open question to what degree this might reflect ancient science, ancient conceptions of the world. Some people have said that when it describes, for example, God's creating the firmament that this means a hard canopy that exists above the earth and separates waters above from the oceans below, and that the windows in this hard canopy open up and the water pours through as rain. I think it's a real question when they use this kind of language: is it meant to be a sort of primitive science? A literal description? I'm very skeptical of that. But that's at least an open question as to the degree to which primitive ancient science might be reflected in this narrative.

END DISCUSSION

Later authors, I think, certainly did understand Genesis 1:1 in terms of *creatio ex nihilo*. For example, Isaiah 44:24 where God declares, “. . . I am the Lord, who made all things, who stretched out the heavens alone, who spread out the earth—Who was with me?” The implicit answer is no one was with him. God was alone in pristine isolation, and he then made all things according to Isaiah 44:24. Isaiah, I think, could never have countenanced the idea that existing alongside of God there was some kind of primordial matter or stuff which he did not create. Look also at Isaiah 45:18, “For thus says the Lord, who created the heavens (he is God!), who formed the earth and made it (he established it; he did not create it a chaos, he formed it to be inhabited!).” God is the one who has made both the heavens and the earth. He is the creator of all things, according to Isaiah.

Similarly, in the creation Psalms we find that God is described as the creator of everything, and the implicit assumption is that there's nothing alongside of God which he did not create. For example, Psalm 33:9: “For he spoke and it came to be. He commanded and it stood forth.” Here's creation simply by God's almighty word – his command – and there is no recalcitrant stuff that he has to work with in order to create the world.

Similarly, Psalm 90:2: “Before the mountains were brought forth or ever thou hadst formed the earth and the world from everlasting to everlasting thou art God.” God here is the only everlasting being, without beginning from eternity to eternity, and everything else, even the mountains which seems so steadfast and firm in their existence, are created by God and therefore transitory unlike God himself. It would be unthinkable that there would have existed some uncreated stuff alongside God. *Creatio ex nihilo* is, I think, the implicit assumption of these creation Psalms.

Job is more explicit. Job 26:7 says, “He stretches out the north over the void and hangs the Earth upon nothing.” So here God is described as creating the world. He hangs the Earth upon literally nothing.

Proverbs 8:22-31 is an extremely interesting meditation on Genesis chapter 1. In this Proverb, God’s Wisdom is personified as a female personage, and she speaks and says, “The Lord created me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of old. Ages ago I was set up, at the first, before the beginning of the earth. When there were no depths I was brought forth” (Proverbs 8:22-24). Here Wisdom is created by God before the beginning of the world. I think especially significant is the claim that God’s Wisdom was with the Lord even when the depths were not yet in existence. Because as someone earlier reminded us it is precisely the depths which Genesis chapter 1 and verse 2 describes when it describes his primordial water over which the Spirit of God was hovering. The author of Proverbs says before the depths were brought forth God existed with his Wisdom. It is God who created the depths, and then in Proverbs it goes on to describe how God took their measure and prescribed their limits.

So much for the Old Testament material. By the time we get to the intertestamental period it’s generally agreed that the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* does find very clear expression. For example, in the book of 2 Maccabees 7:28 we read, “Observe heaven and earth, consider all that is in them and acknowledge that God made them out of what did not exist, and that mankind comes into being in the same way.” Maccabees is an apocryphal intertestamental book. Catholics include it in their canon, but Protestants do not. But it does bear witness to what Judaism believed during that intertestamental period. And in chapter 7 verse 28 you seem to have a clear statement of God’s creation of the universe out of nothing.

START DISCUSSION

Student: One of the points that I’ve seen Hugh Ross make in a lot of his debates is that Job was written first and would have been widely circulated before Genesis was written. The Job creation accounts would have been well known to the readers and writer of Genesis. So the Genesis account, he says, is supplementary information to the Job account.

Dr. Craig: Really? I would be very skeptical of dating Job in that way with any kind of confidence. I’d have to see some really good evidence for that. That surprises me. Have you looked into this at all?

Student: No, other than having read outside sources that say that Job was probably the first book of the Bible that was written down that predates all the others.

Dr. Craig: That would be interesting if Hugh Ross takes a late date for Genesis. I don't know what his dating for Genesis is.

Student: I don't know if he says late, but later than Job.

Student: What do we make of the statement that Christ made about us being with him before the beginning?

Dr. Craig: I don't think that he says anywhere that we were with him before the beginning. He says that he was with the Father before the beginning, which teaches the pre-existence of Christ prior to his incarnation – that Christ existed prior to his being born of Mary. But I don't think there's anything to suggest that we were about.

Student: Then portending to Wisdom – do we assume that Christ was with God before God created Wisdom?

Dr. Craig: It is characteristic of Jewish thought that various attributes of God would be reified or personified like his Wisdom and his Word. These are not thought to be entities that are actually distinct from God. These are just literary personifications of his attributes. Now, early church fathers did identify the Word with Jesus Christ because John 1 says that Christ is the Word who was with God and was God from the beginning. They frequently identified God's Wisdom with the Holy Spirit. So the Holy Spirit was identified with Wisdom; Christ with the Word. But that's a result of later theological reflection. When you read this in Proverbs, there's no suggestion that this is a sort of Trinitarian passage. Quite the contrary, Wisdom talks about being created by God albeit before the world was made.

END DISCUSSION

I think at this point it would be a good breaking point. What we'll do next time is look at New Testament material pertinent to *creatio ex nihilo*.¹

¹
Craig)