§ 9. Excursus on Creation of Life and Biological Diversity
Lecture 7
The Literary Framework and the Functional Creation Interpretations

Today we turn to a new interpretation of Genesis chapter 1 which is called the literary framework interpretation. The literary framework view has been very ably explained and defended by the French biblical scholar Henri Blocher in his book *In the Beginning*.\(^1\) According to this view, the author of Genesis is not interested in chronology. He is not attempting to relate one day after another in a chronological fashion. Rather, the days serve as a sort of literary framework on which he hangs his account of creation. He wants to describe how God creates all of life, all of the world, and he uses the framework of a week of six days as a literary structure on which to hang his account. But he doesn't intend for this six-day week to be taken literally in a chronological fashion.

Now, ever since the Middle Ages, commentators have noticed that there seems to be a sort of parallelism between days 1 to 3 and days 4 to 6. Blocher maintains that on the first three days God creates the domain (or the space) for a certain thing to inhabit, and then on the second three days he creates the occupants of that space or domain. So, for example, on day 1 he creates day and night, and then on day 4 he creates the sun, moon, and stars. On day 2 he creates the firmament which separates the waters above from the waters below. Corresponding to this is day 5 when he creates the sea creatures which will live in the waters below and the birds which will fly in the sky above. And then, on day 3, we have the creation of the dry land as well as the vegetation, and parallel to that is day 6 in which God creates the terrestrial animals and finally man. So 1 and 4 are correlated, 2 and 5 are correlated, and 3 and 6 are correlated. Notice that on days 3 and 6 you also have a parallel in that you have a double creation on those days. On 3 you have both the dry land and the vegetation created by God, and on day 6 you have both the terrestrial animals as well as man created on day 6.

So the idea of the literary framework hypothesis is that the first three days described the habitats or the domains, and then on the second three days he describes the denizens or the occupants of those domains. So the creation account is not intended to be chronological. It’s thematic. The creation week is a sort of thematic or literary framework on which he hangs a non-chronological account of creation.

What might be said by way of critique of this interpretation? Well, I think we have to admit that this is an extremely interesting view which deserves careful consideration. But I have to confess to being skeptical about the alleged parallelism between days 1 to 3 and days 4 to 6. A closer reading of the text seems to reveal that these are not, in fact, exactly parallel. For example, what corresponds to God's creating the sun, moon, and stars on day

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\(^1\) Henri Blocher, *In the Beginning: The Opening Chapters of Genesis* (InterVarsity Press, 1984).
4? It's not the separation of day and night. It's the creation of the firmament on day 2. On day 2, God creates the firmament. On day 4 he places the sun, moon, and stars in the firmament. The literary or verbal connection between the two is indisputable. So really 4 describes the inhabitants of the domain created on day 2, namely the firmament. Moreover, what corresponds to the creation of the sea creatures on day 5? Well, again, it's not the waters above and the waters below. It's the creation of the seas on day 3. Now, admittedly, there are waters above and waters below that are separated on day 2, but the waters below are not gathered into seas until day 3 when the dry land appears and the water then gathers into seas, and it is in the seas that the sea creatures are created. Therefore, that's again the parallel between the domain and the inhabitant of that domain. Finally, on day 3 we have God creating not only the dry land but also the vegetation which seems to be the inhabitant of the dry land. Both of them are created on the same day. I think it would be a real stretch to say that vegetation is the domain that's inhabited by animals and man. It seems to me that this parallelism that has been constructed is not something that's really there in the text but rather it's imposed on the text by the mind of the interpreter. Fortunately, I don't think that the literary framework interpretation stands or falls with whether we see the framework in terms of parallelism of domains and inhabitants. When we get to the functional creation interpretation we'll see another option for understanding the correlation between the days, but it does not seem that Blocher's interpretation is one that does justice to the text. Nevertheless, I do think that the idea of a literary framework is interesting and deserves consideration. Moreover, I'm not convinced that the chronology in the narrative is not to be taken seriously. The chronology on the literary framework view is meaningless, but surely the idea of numbering the consecutive days with ordinal numbers (2nd, 3rd, 4th, 5th) and the progression from desolation and lifelessness up through life (plants, animals, and then finally man) does seem to suggest chronology. There seems to be a temporal development going on here. I think it's hard to resist the impression that the narrative intends to portray a temporal progression that finally ends with God's resting from the work of creation on the seventh and the final day. Blocher admits that creation over a period of time is a common motif in ancient creation myths, so why think that the motif is here non-chronological? Mere parallelism between the days doesn't suffice to disprove any interest in chronology on the part of the author. So, for those two reasons, I find myself rather skeptical of the literary framework hypothesis.

START DISCUSSION

Student: [off-mic]
Dr. Craig: Let's explain the terms here in case people didn't hear what was asked. He said: *Is this an example of exegesis or eisegesis?* Now, what does that mean? Well, *ex* means “out of” and so this would be to draw the meaning of the text out of the text. *Eis* is the Greek word meaning “into” and so the practice of eisegesis would be reading things into the text. We sometimes call this reading between the lines. The question here is: Is Blocher’s literary framework view an example of eisegesis? I said I don't want to be uncharitable. It's not as though the view is indefensible. It's just that I'm not persuaded that these parallels really exist. In that case it does seem to me that one is reading the parallelism into the text and that it's not actually found there. For example, day and night are not the domains or the space that is inhabited by the sun, moon, and stars. They are in the expanse or in the firmament, and so that correlation just doesn't seem to exist. And vegetation isn't a space or a domain. That you would expect to be over here. If I were making a parallel, I'd say he created the dry land then over here he created the vegetation to inhabit the dry land. But that's not the way it is. So I do think that there is a kind of reading in here.

Student: Though I disagree with the framework view because I think the days are literal instead of metaphorical, as a way of supporting it, day 4 does use terminology from day 1 when it says the purpose of the lights is for separating the day and the night so there is that phrase that's repeated from day 1. The birds are specifically spoken of as flying across the face of the firmament or the expanse. So there's a connection there.

Dr. Craig: Before I forget your points, let me just respond briefly. You're quite right. One of the functions of the astral bodies is to mark the difference between day and night, but my point is that day and night isn't a domain. It's not a space that's inhabited by the sun and the moon though you're quite right that they have the function of marking it. Similarly, I didn't deny that you could make a parallel here of the birds with the firmament. My complaint was more with the sea creatures.

Student: The way I’ve heard it is not so much as domain. It's more like it could be domain but then the second part is what is filling the domain. So, in other words, the sun, moon, and stars are the cause of the lights; the sea creatures, the birds are the things that are filling the sky and the seas.

Dr. Craig: That sounds like inhabitants and domain to me, and I don't see that sun, moon, and stars which caused the night and day to be inhabiting them. They're placed in the firmament or in the expanse. They caused the day and night and measure it.

Student: I sort of semi-explained last week that my interpretation of the firmament – what’s expanding – is the view of the heavens. So the firmament is limited on day 2. On day 1, if you had been there on day 1, you wouldn't have been able to see what was causing the lights because there was no firmament at that point.
Dr. Craig: Yes, I understand.

Student: So, yes, there is day and night, but we're still talking about heavens. Anyhow, on 3 and 6, animals and man do live on the dry land, and of course are specifically said to eat the vegetation, and the vegetation that's mentioned on day 3 are specifically for – two of the parts of it – are that which is for mankind.

Dr. Craig: Yeah. Again, my complaint wasn't that there isn't some correlation here between 6 and 3, but that the correlation is more naturally between the second element of 3 and the first element of 3. That's where it seems to me you have domain and then the inhabitant created. The vegetation, to me, seems out of place if we're talking about domains and the stuff that fills the domain.

END DISCUSSION

Let’s turn to the next interpretation which is called functional creation. The Old Testament scholar John Walton in his book *The Lost World of Genesis One* has defended a view which he calls functional creation. This view has, as of recent years, I think become quite influential. Again, the author's name is John Walton, and of his many books *The Lost World of Genesis One* makes this case. Walton maintains that the notion of creation in the ancient Near East has been universally misunderstood by contemporary scholars. We understand creation to be about how material things come into existence when, in fact, in the ancient world it was really about specifying the functions that material things should carry out. It wasn't about the creation of those material things, but about specifying the function they would fill. Walton gives the very engaging illustration of a restaurant. He says when does a restaurant begin to exist? He would say it is not when the original building was constructed. That building might have been originally a warehouse, for example, and now there's been some urban renewal and the building has been renovated and turned into a restaurant. The restaurant begins to exist when that building starts to function as a restaurant – when it gets a license, opens the doors, and begins to carry out the functions of a restaurant. And to say that the restaurant began to exist in, say, 2013 doesn't mean that that’s when the building was created. It may have been there for a long time. His claim is that Genesis 1, similarly, is not about God's bringing the earth, the land, the vegetation, the animals, etc. into existence. Rather, it's about his declaring their functions in the created order relative to humanity. The seven days are taken to be literal consecutive days during which the universe is inaugurated to function as God's cosmic temple in which he will dwell. The seventh day is the climax of this inauguration. When God comes to reside in his temple, it is not the end of God's creative work whereby he brings these things into existence. Rather, it is that the functions of everything have now been fully specified, its functionaries have been

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installed to carry out those functions, and so now God comes to reside in his cosmic
temple which is the world.

Walton claims that the functional creation interpretation is a literal interpretation of the
text. It is not figurative or literary. It is about seven literal consecutive days of creation.
It's just that creation didn't mean what everyone has taken it to mean. Genesis 1 is to be
literally interpreted, but it is wholly about functional creation – about specifying the
functions that things should fill, and it is not about the creation of material things.

What might be said by way of critique about the functional creation interpretation? First
of all, I think there is a desperate need for terminological clarification concerning this
view. Walton draws a very firm dichotomy between what he calls material ontology and
functional ontology, or between material creation and functional creation. Unfortunately,
this terminology is nowhere clearly and carefully defined, and as a result it tends to be
extremely misleading and inaccurate. When Walton talks about material creation, it is far
from clear exactly what he understands that to be. One might think that he means simply
the coming into being of a physical object through God's causation. God causes the
physical object to come into being. But it seems that Walton means more than that by
material creation. He seems to think that if God creates a material object, he must do so
ex nihilo; that is to say, out of nothing. Material creation for Walton seems to mean not
merely that the object comes into being at that point but that it comes into being from
nothing. It seems to me that this is obviously mistaken. It's wrongheaded. For example,
the efficient cause of a chair doesn't have to create the material out of which the chair is
made. When a carpenter makes a chair, he is the efficient cause of the chair, but the
lumber is the material cause of the chair. Now, the question is not whether God creates
the various organisms in Genesis 1 ex nihilo. There's no reason to make such a claim. On
the contrary, in fact, God says of the plants and the animals “let the earth bring forth,
etc.” And the creation of man described in Genesis chapter 2 involves God's forming the
man out of the dust of the earth. So there isn't any reason to think that creation in Genesis
has to be creation ex nihilo. Rather, the question that we're interested in is whether
Genesis 1 describes God as the efficient cause of the objects described, whether he uses
pre-existing material to make them or not. Or does God merely specify the functions of
objects that are already there? Do you see the question? The question is whether Genesis
1 describes God as bringing into being the things that are described whether he uses
material or not, or does he merely specify the functions for things that are already in
existence?

I think that we have to guard here against erecting false dichotomies. Just because a text
speaks of God specifying an object's function doesn't exclude efficient causation as well.
Walton has to show that the text of Genesis 1 is concerned exclusively with functional
creation. It is not enough to show that functional creation is involved. He has to show that
efficient causation does not come into the picture at all, for if God is the efficient cause of the objects described then they come into being when God creates them whether he creates them *ex nihilo* or out of existing matter. So when we clarify the terminology, I think you can see that Walton has a considerable burden of proof. He needs to show that Genesis 1 involves only the specification of functions for things that exist and not God's bringing them into being at that time.

**START DISCUSSION**

*Student*: This is a two-part question. The first is: does Walton deny *creatio ex nihilo*? And then the second part of the question is this (and this is just a random shot in the dark): do you think Walton might be some sort of mereological nihilist?

*Dr. Craig*: Let's think about the first one first. No, he doesn't deny creation *ex nihilo*. It is true that he thinks that Genesis 1:1 is merely a summary title for the entire chapter, so he would be, I think, of the view that Genesis 1 doesn't teach creation *ex nihilo*. But that doesn't mean he denies it. He doesn't deny it. He would simply say it's not taught there.

Now, your question was: is he a mereological nihilist?

*Student*: Yeah, because I could imagine him saying things don't really come into being; there's just these different arrangements of different particles and there isn't coming into being like a mereological nihilist might think.

*Dr. Craig*: Let's clarify the question. He wants to know if John Walton is a mereological nihilist. I'm sure John Walton has never heard of that, but he could be one even though he'd never heard the nomenclature. Mereology is the philosophical study of parts and wholes – how do parts go together to form composite things. A nihilist, as the name suggests, denies that there are any composite objects; that there really are no podiums or people or planets or chairs. These are simply fundamental particles (like quarks or electrons) arranged podium-wise or chair-wise or planet-wise, but all that exists is really just fundamental particles and there are no composite objects. Now, I don't see anything in Walton that would lead me to think he denies that there are composite objects. I think he most certainly does believe that there are composite objects like the animals, the plants, the sun, the stars. But he would simply say that what we have in Genesis is not the description of their creation. He's denying that what we have here is an account of how they came to exist. Rather, he thinks that it is simply God specifying what the animals are for, what the plants are for, what function the stars and the moon should fulfill, and so forth. So it's not a creation account at all in the way in which moderns understand the word “creation.” It's just a specification of the function of these different objects which I think he would affirm are real.
Student: In reading his book, Walton makes an interesting statement that if you were to ask the ancient Near Easterners who the account was written to, whether they believed that God was responsible for the material creation, he thinks they would have said “yes” but he doesn't think the account teaches that. What I would like to ask him is if the Bible does teach that somewhere, where does it teach it if not in Genesis? That’s what I would want to ask him.

Dr. Craig: Alright. We're out of time, unfortunately, but we will be spending all of the next period on Walton’s view, and so you'll have an opportunity to ask further questions then.³