

## § 9. Excursus on Creation of Life and Biological Diversity

### Lecture 10

#### The Monotheistic Hebrew Myth Interpretation

Today we come to our eighth and final interpretive alternative of Genesis chapter 1. I'm calling this the monotheistic Hebrew myth interpretation. As a springboard for understanding this interpretation, I want to appeal to a book by a pair of evangelical scholars, Johnny Miller and John Soden, called *In the Beginning. . . We Misunderstood* published in 2012. Miller and Soden are professors at Columbia Bible College and Lancaster Bible College, both with doctorates from Dallas Theological Seminary. So they have conservative *bona fides* which are simply impeccable. They can't be accused of being radical liberal or progressive scholars.

They argue in their book that Genesis 1:1 to 2:3 is not to be taken literally. They rehearse the evidence against a literal interpretation of the text which we've reviewed already in this class when we discussed the literal interpretation. They also agree with the literary framework view of the French scholar Henri Blocher that the days are not chronologically ordered in Genesis 1 but rather are ordered in a kind of parallel or thematic fashion that doesn't imply a chronological week of days. Moreover, they agree with John Walton's view that creation begins with verse 2 of the text and not with verse 1. In all of these respects their view is familiar and not new.

What is distinctive about their view is the way in which they understand the Genesis account in relation to ancient Near Eastern mythology. They maintain that the key to correctly interpreting Genesis 1 is to compare it with Egyptian creation myths. They also survey Mesopotamian myths and Canaanite myths as well, but they think that these bear few resemblances to Genesis 1. But they point out Israel was in Egypt for some four hundred years, and the Israelites had come to worship Egyptian deities. When we compare Genesis 1 to the Egyptian creation myths then very significant similarities, as well as differences, emerge. The differences help us to see the ways in which Israel sought to correct these pagan myths.

Reconstructing an Egyptian creation myth is extraordinarily difficult. They admit,

There is no single Egyptian account known to date that describes the complete Egyptian perspective on creation. Instead, we have to put together a mosaic of bits and pieces recorded in various documents. These documents represent a mixture of times and theologies (covering more than two millennia), many of them in tension with one another, a situation that did not seem to bother the Egyptians. . . . For the most part, Egyptian creation documents consists of brief statements and

allusions, scattered among many inscriptions (Pyramid Texts, Coffin Texts, the Book of the Dead, and other inscriptions).<sup>1</sup>

So there really isn't a creation story available in Egypt, but they cobble together these various inscriptions from tombs, from coffins, from various other monuments, and in that way try to construct a coherent picture of what these Egyptian theologians believed about creation.

They summarize the Egyptian creation myth in the following way, and I'm going to read now a very lengthy quotation of their summary of the view of creation in these Egyptian myths.

Before the beginning of creation, there was only an infinite dark, watery, chaotic sea. There was nothing above the sea or below the sea – the sea was all there was. Immersed in the sea, Atum (or Re or Amun or Ptah), the creator god and source of everything, brought himself into existence by separating himself from the waters. Egyptian cosmologies that view Amun as the creator, or even as one of the four initial qualities of the precreation matter (watery, unlimited, dark, imperceptible) from which creation emerges, would then also understand the wind to be present in the water, because Amun was also god of wind. Since Atum, Amun, and Re are all connected with the sun, light was then in existence, even though the sun itself had not yet risen.

While several means of creation are used interchangeably in the Egyptian accounts (including sneezing or spitting and masturbation), in many accounts Atum (or one of the other gods noted above) spoke the universe into existence. This new creation (or the "universe" as conceived by the Egyptians) began with the separation of the waters to create the atmosphere (a bubble of air, known as the god Shu, in the midst of this endless mass of water). Atum's command separated the surface of the waters in the sky (Nut) from the earth (Geb). The waters receded and the first mound of earth appeared. The sun (Re), already in the waters (Nun) before the separation of the atmosphere, rose for the first time as the main event of creation. And so the basic universe was formed – a bubble of light, air, earth, and sky in the continuing infinity of dark, motionless water.

The universe was actually composed of thousands of gods (all of which were part of Atum) in the Egyptian understanding, because "all the elements and forces that a human being might encounter in this world are not impersonal matter and energy but the forms and wills of living beings – beings that surpass the merely human scale, and are therefore gods." Into the universe, Atum commanded the

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<sup>1</sup> Johnny V. Miller, John M. Soden, *In the Beginning... We Misunderstood: Interpreting Genesis 1 in Its Original Context* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2012) pp. 77, 82.

creation of plants and animal life, Re formed man as his image, of Khnum fashioned man on a potter's wheel with the breath of the god (Re or Hekat or Aton) giving life to the image. In some accounts, man springs from the tears of the eye of Atum (the sun).

After speaking into existence the "universe" and its millions of gods with their towns, shrines, and offerings, Ptah rested with everything in order. . . .

In Egyptian theology, all of creation was done in a single day, which was called "the first occasion." At the end of the day, the sun traveled through the Duat (the Egyptian underworld) and fought the enemies of order to arise victorious the next day. [So when the sun sets, it goes through the underworld and fights with the deities of the underworld which would bring disorder until it rises again the next day.] Each succeeding day reenacted the creation event: the sun had won its victory over the enemies again and begun a new day of order.<sup>2</sup>

## **START DISCUSSION**

*Student:* You say it's composite. Is there any one thing that's true of all of them?

*Dr. Craig:* That's a very good question because I can't emphasize enough that there is no coherent unified account. This is a mosaic that's been cobbled together by these modern scholars that represents different theologies from different Egyptian cities like Heliopolis, Thebes, and Memphis. They've cobbled it together, and these texts are spread over more than 2,000 years. So are there any elements that are common? I think, and we'll talk about this more later, that one of the most principal common elements would be what we could call monism – namely that multiplicity and diversity all emerge from an undifferentiated primal state of affairs. This was represented by water and darkness because water is so amorphous it can take any sort of shape in their thinking (they were unaware of the molecular structure of water, of course). So it seemed a suitable symbol to represent this undifferentiated absolute primordial condition in which there were no distinct things. What happens then is that the God brings himself into existence out of this state. It's not that he's uncreated. I looked at the text to see maybe they think he just came into being uncaused. No, the texts say he created himself. That would seem to be a common element to all of these. Then of course polytheism. These myths are more theogonies than cosmogonies. A cosmogony (as you can see from the word *cosmos*) is an account of the origin of the world. But a theogony (as you can see from the word *theos* which means "god") is an account of the origin of gods. So these are, properly speaking, theogonies about how the gods come into being out of this primordial undifferentiated condition. Those would be a couple of elements that would be common to all of them.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., pp. 78-80.

*Student:* I believe you referred to Israel during the four hundred years they were in Egypt. Were you saying they could be categorized as polytheistic during the time they were there? Or some of them maintaining their monotheism that they got from Abraham?

*Dr. Craig:* I think what Miller and Soden are referring to is that some of the Israelites had figurines or statues of Egyptian deities in their homes and that therefore they had become infected with Egyptian religion. For that reason they think it shouldn't be so surprising if these old traditions underlying Genesis would betray some of the influences of these Egyptian religions. But I don't think they're suggesting that they were out-and-out polytheists.

*Student:* This was especially curious to me. I have a close friend of mine who's saying that Israel didn't become monotheistic until after Egypt and much later. So your reference to elements of polytheism in Israel in Egypt was especially curious to me. I was wondering how accurate that is.

*Dr. Craig:* I'm only responding to what their view of this is, and I don't think they commit themselves to so radical a thesis.

## **END DISCUSSION**

Miller and Soden draw various points of similarity with Genesis, but also point out significant differences. What they maintain is that the goal of the author of Genesis is not to correct the physical descriptions found in these Egyptian creation stories, but rather to correct the theology of creation. For example, the author of Genesis, they say, completely demythologizes the natural world. He gets rid of all of these gods and goddesses and instead has a single creator God who is the source of everything else and who is not himself self-created or comes out of the primordial water but is rather a transcendent and sovereign deity. So they write,

. . . in most cases, the biblical writer uses common motifs to demonstrate the stark differences in the Hebrew presentation of God. In other words, the considerable differences show that Genesis is not *copying* but *recasting* the events of creation in order to argue strongly for a different theology.<sup>3</sup>

So the people of Israel reject the polytheistic pagan myths and substitute for it, as it were, a Hebrew monotheistic myth about the Creator God of Israel. Here is how they summarize the Hebrew creation theology which is opposed to the creation theology of Egypt.

Moses does not directly dispute the events of creation, but he uses common Egyptian perceptions of creation to present a radically different and unique

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 98.

understanding of God and his relationship to man in this world. To summarize these distinctions:

1. *God in Genesis exists independently of creation and is not created or self-created.* . . .
2. *God alone transcends creation.* [There are no other deities, no other transcendent beings.] . . .
3. *God is sovereign over all creation.* [There is no sort of warring factions; no sort of obstacle to be overcome. Rather, God is completely sovereign over the created world.] . . .
4. *God alone is deity.* [Not only is there no account of the creation of gods, there is the clear implication that no other gods are created. So it's not simply that God is over the hierarchy of other deities, but there aren't any other deities. There are no other gods that God has created.] . . .
5. *Mankind has great significance and value as God's image.* Mankind replaces the sun as the central focus of creation and the climax of that creation. . . .
6. *Israel was to celebrate the rule of God in their lives by imitating their Creator in work and rest each week.* . . . This weekly respite presents a dramatic shift from the daily conquest of the sun god over chaos, his rebirth each morning, and the daily grind of uncertainty in each Egyptian day. . . .<sup>4</sup>

## **START DISCUSSION**

*Student:* Just to clarify, the purpose of this idea here is to say that there's a possibility that the account of Genesis is not a literal account. It's more a corrective – just a theological corrective?

*Dr. Craig:* Yes, that's right. We shouldn't be surprised, on their view, if the Genesis account retains a lot of these mythological elements like the primordial darkness and the water, the Spirit of God or the wind moving over the surface, things of that sort because that would be the cultural background of Israel. But what the Israelites sought to correct in this was (I think we could say fairly) principally polytheism and replace it with monotheism. And that then results in a very different kind of God. Now it's not one that is self-created or created by other deities, but it's a transcendent God, a God who is over all creation. There are no other gods. The substitution of monotheism for polytheism represents a very radical break with these pagan myths.

*Student:* Later, are you going to maybe point out some biblical . . . how the Bible would address that concept itself?

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., pp. 110-111.

*Dr. Craig:* We will give a critical analysis of this view. Yes, certainly. We'll start that next week. But right now we're just trying to lay out fairly the view that they express.

*Student:* If I'm following this correctly, this isn't to be kind of confused with N. T. Wright's view – this is not necessarily a polemic against the Egyptian mythology.

*Dr. Craig:* I am not aware that that is N. T. Wright's view, but that certainly is a view that is popular among certain Old Testament commentators. I think, for example, of Gerhard Hasel who published a widely quoted article many years ago in which he argues that you can see the influence of Mesopotamian or Egyptian mythology in the creation account but the creation account in Genesis is meant (as you just said) to be a polemic against these views. So they reflect them in terms of their opposition to them rather than adopting certain motifs. That doesn't seem to be Miller and Soden's view. They would agree that there is this radical departure from polytheism and the substitution of monotheism, but they seem to be more blasé about leaving in place these other mythological aspects of the creation story so long as the theology is corrected. It's related. Both of those views (Hasel's as well as theirs) would see that this should be read against this background – the cultural background of pagan mythology of Mesopotamia and Egypt. But the one sees it more as a reaction to it whereas (I think it's not unfair to say) on their view it assimilates a lot of it but radically departs from it in its monotheism. That's why I call this view (and this is my own label; this is not their label) – Hebrew monotheistic myth.

*Student:* Are we saying then that the understanding of who God is in the creation, although it was not fully understood by mankind going back to Abraham and so forth, when they went into Egypt they were influenced by the Egyptian religion and incorporated perhaps a lot of the beliefs of the Egyptian people, and when Moses or whomever wrote Genesis it was really to kind of acknowledge where they had picked up these concepts but then to clarify or correct or redirect the thinking into a more accurate (as they understand that was revealed by God) of the actual creation story?

*Dr. Craig:* Almost. That was a very beautiful summary. I would say, except for the last couple words, that it was meant to correct the concept of God in these accounts.

*Student:* You said they think that verse 2 is the start of creation. Does that mean they would hold that verse 1 is the title?

*Dr. Craig:* I take it that that's right. We talked about this before. Many scholars think that verse 1, "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the Earth," is not the first event of the creation, rather it's a sort of title of the chapter much as you might have in a Study Bible where it would have the title of the chapter. That seems to be Miller and Soden's view. I argued against that in an earlier class, but this is their view. That's important because if you say that view – the title view – then that makes Genesis look a little more like these Egyptian stories. Where do they begin? They begin with the primordial watery

darkness. And Miller and Soden are not unwilling to call this chaos even – that Genesis begins with a state of chaos. That is more plausible if you excise verse 1 and make it just a summary or a title.

*Student:* I was wondering what you thought of the idea that monotheism would have predated polytheism, and if it's possible that Moses used source material in giving us the creation account so that he may not have been the actual originator of the story. In which case, the Genesis story would predate Mesopotamia and even Egypt possibly. Then that would make this whole idea more of something God did in advance knowing that people would go this direction as opposed to responding to it directly.

*Dr. Craig:* I'm not sufficiently expert in the history of religions to be able to speak to that as to how far back a kind of primitive monotheism reaches. Certainly some people have defended such a view. But I do think we need to be very open to the idea that what we have in Genesis embodies very old traditions that go far back in advance of the Exodus. Nobody really knows the date of the composition of the Pentateuch or the time that Genesis was reduced to writing or how far back the oral traditions go. It's really conjecture. Any conclusions that are founded on giving firm dates to those sorts of things, I think, are rendered more uncertain by that.

*Student:* If I can channel my inner van Inwagen for a moment, I'll say the idea of a chaos is just unintelligible to me.

*Dr. Craig:* [laughter] You need to understand his background for this question! Peter van Inwagen is infamous – he's a Christian philosopher – for saying of views that he wants to criticize or disagree with, *I just don't understand what you're saying*. And in van Inwagen's hands this is a devastating critique because you would think that an intelligent and informed person would understand the view. So when he says, *I don't understand it*, this is his way of saying your view is unintelligible. And you're saying that's the case with chaos.

*Student:* Yeah. I have no idea what's being . . .

*Dr. Craig:* Can you explain yourself as to why you find that difficult to understand?

*Student:* You talk about there being, for example, an infinite amount of water, or just water. But there's going to be empty space, a quantum vacuum, things like that.

*Dr. Craig:* I agree with you in large measure, and it is a source of irritation to me the way Old Testament scholars who are untrained in either science or philosophy throw around the word “chaos.” I'm going to argue later on that the state of affairs described in Genesis 1:2 is anything but a chaos. A chaos is an utterly lawless state in which anything can happen, and that is clearly not the state of the Earth in Genesis 1:2. I think it could be

used to describe these Egyptian myths if we take water and darkness to be merely symbols or representations (not literal) of this primordial, undifferentiated, monistic state.

### **END DISCUSSION**

Let me wrap up here with a summary. The force of the title of Miller and Soden's book, *In the Beginning. . . We Misunderstood*, seems to be that we have misunderstood the type of literature that Genesis is. Their book raises the question whether Genesis is not also of the genre of myth as are the Egyptian accounts of creation. The difference between them lies not in their literary genre but rather in their theology. In contrast to the polytheistic Egyptian myths, Genesis is a monotheistic Hebrew myth. That will be the view that we will then begin to assess when we meet next week.<sup>5</sup>

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