

§ 9. Excursus on Creation of Life and Biological Diversity

Lecture 20

Why Think Genesis 1-11 is Mytho-History?

On the basis of the metaphoricalness, the plasticity, and the flexibility of myths, we've seen from both anthropological studies as well as Ancient Near Eastern literature that myths are not always best interpreted literalistically. Now we want to make application of these insights to Genesis 1-11.

When we consider the biblical narratives that are at the heart of our study, namely the creation of the world in chapter 1 and the origin and Fall of Adam and Eve in chapters 2 and 3, then it seems to me that a non-literal interpretation of these narratives is very plausible. First and foremost is the creation of the world in six consecutive 24-hour days – a description that doesn't require a knowledge of modern science to recognize as metaphorical. We've already seen reasons in our previous lessons to interpret the six days non-literally. Next is the humanoid deity which appears in chapters 2 and 3 in contrast to the transcendent Creator of the heavens and the Earth in chapter 1.

The anthropomorphic nature of God, which is merely hinted at in chapter 2, becomes inescapable in chapter 3 where God is described as walking in the Garden in the cool of the day calling audibly to Adam who is hiding from him. Genesis 3:8-9 state,

And they heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden. But the Lord God called to the man, and said to him, “Where are you?”

Read in light of Genesis 3, God's creation of Adam in Genesis 2 takes on an anthropomorphic character as well. Here God is portrayed (like the Mesopotamian goddess Nintur shaping bits of clay into a human being, or the Egyptian God Khnum sitting at his potter's wheel forming man) as fashioning man out of the dust of the ground and then breathing into his nostrils the breath of life so that the earthen figure comes to life. We're not told whether God similarly formed the animals when, “out of the ground the Lord God formed every beast of the field and bird of the air” (Genesis 2:19) but we can't help but wonder if they weren't formed in the same way as man. When God takes one of the sleeping Adam's ribs, closes up the flesh, and builds a woman out of it, the story sounds like a physical surgery which God performs on Adam, followed by his building a woman out of the extracted body part. Similarly, given God's bodily presence in the Garden, the conversations between God and the protagonists in the story of the Fall (namely Adam, Eve, and the serpent) read like a dialogue between persons who are physically present to one another. God's making garments for Adam and Eve out of animal skins and driving them out of the Garden sound again like physical acts by the

humanoid God. Given the exalted transcendent nature of God described in the creation story, the Pentateuchal author could not possibly have intended these anthropomorphic descriptions to be taken literally. They are in the figurative language of myth.

Moreover, many features of these stories are fantastic. That is to say, they are palpably false if taken literally. So I'm using the word "fantastic" here with a technical precision. To say that something is fantastic means that it is palpably false if taken literally. Here I'm talking about features of the narrative that the author himself would have plausibly thought fantastic.

For example, chapter 2 begins by saying that when God created man it had never rained upon the Earth. Now this seems fantastic. Ancient Israelites understood the water cycle as is abundantly attested throughout the Old Testament. In light of chapter 1's affirmation that God had separated the waters above from the waters below, it's hard to believe that the author thought that there was ever a time in the Earth's history when the Earth was utterly devoid of rain. Just as the waters below took the form of seas and rivers and springs, so the waters above took the form of rain. So an Earth which is replete with seas and rivers and springs (such as Genesis 2 describes) but without rain seems fantastic even for an ancient Israelite given his knowledge of the water cycle.

Then there is the description of the Garden of Eden with its Tree of Life and Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. These are plausibly symbolic. The idea of an arboretum containing trees bearing fruit which if eaten would confer immortality or yield sudden moral knowledge of good and evil must have seemed fantastic to the Pentateuchal author. Keep in mind here that we are not dealing with miraculous fruit, as if God would on the occasion of eating impose immortality or supernatural knowledge of good and evil on the eater for these were against his will. The fruit is said to have their effect even contrary to God's will. The Garden of Eden may have described an actual existing geographical location (plausibly the Persian Gulf oasis), but like Mount Olympus in Greek mythology that site may have been employed to tell a mythological story about what happened at that site.

Then there is the notorious walking and talking snake in the Garden. Now, he makes for a great character in the story – conniving, sinister, opposed to God, perhaps a symbol of evil, but not plausibly a literal reptile such as you might encounter in your own garden. For the Pentateuchal author knew that snakes neither talked nor are intelligent agents. Again, the snake's personality and speech cannot (like Balaam's ass) be attributed to miraculous activity on the part of God lest God become the author of the Fall. The snake is not identified as an incarnation of Satan. Rather, he is described as simply the craftiest of the beasts of the field which the Lord God had made – a description which is incompatible with his being Satan.

When God finally drives the man and his wife out of the Garden of Eden he stations at its entrance, “the cherubim and a flaming sword which turned every way to guard the way to the Tree of Life” (Genesis 2:24). What makes this detail fantastic is that the cherubim were not thought to be real beings, but fantasies composed of a lion's body, a bird's wings, and a man's head. The Jewish commentator Nahum Sarna in his commentary on the book of Genesis observes that the motif of composite human-animal-bird figures was widespread in various forms throughout the Ancient Near East, and he thinks that it is prominent in both art and religious symbolism, and that the biblical cherubim seem to be connected with this artistic tradition. Cherubim filled multiple roles in the biblical tradition such as symbolizing God's presence or God's sovereignty. Artistic representations of such creatures were to be found in the tabernacle and the temple including in the Holy of Holies. Sarna points out that they are the only pictorial representation permitted in Judaism, an otherwise anti-iconic religion. They don't violate the prohibition against images because they are, “purely products of the human imagination” and so “do not represent any existing reality in heaven and earth.”¹ Thus images of them could be made in ancient Israel without breaking the second commandment prohibiting images of things in heaven, for the cherubim were not real. And yet, here in Genesis 3, they are posted as guards at a time and place in history (along with a rotating, flashing sword) to guard for an indeterminate time the Garden of Eden against man's re-entry into the Garden. Since cherubim were regarded as creatures of fantasy and symbol, it's not as though the author thought what realism would require that the cherubim remained at the entrance to the Garden for years on end until it was either overgrown with weeds or swept away by the Flood.

So there are a number of features in these narratives which I think, if interpreted literally, would be palpably false which gives good grounds for thinking that they are in fact to be taken as figurative or metaphorical discourse.

START DISCUSSION

Student: I'm a bit confused as to why God taking anthropomorphic form in the Garden would be unthinkable considering how he does the same thing with Abraham just before the fall of Sodom and Gomorrah.

Dr. Craig: Yeah, right. There it talks about the Angel of the Lord appearing to Abraham. Right? But there isn't any such identification here. You'd have to think that that's what happened – that there was some sort of an incarnation. And I guess I don't see that as contemplated in the text. It seems to me more plausibly to be interpreted metaphorically.

¹ Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, The JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), “Excursus 1: The Cherubim,” pp. 375-76.

Student: Along the same lines regarding the angels and perhaps Satan as the snake, this might seem strange but one of my original interests in the area of apologetics was in matters of the paranormal, was in hearing stories of ghosts and demons and poltergeists, and this came from watching too many movies. But the thing that I found though and the more stories that I heard it seems to me that one of the capacities that demons especially enjoy and perhaps what's referenced later in Genesis when they overstep their boundaries is the capacity to possess living things. We know that, or at least from stories that people have told from around the world, that they don't just possess people but they also possess animals. Just as they can speak through people (as Legion did speak directly to Jesus) the demons can also speak through animals as well if they so choose. I'd also like to point out there is no detail and there's a original chapter that says that the snake ever had legs, that he used to walk around. God just curses him to go on his belly.

Dr. Craig: Yes, right.

Student: But I'm just wondering that, in my experience, it doesn't seem implausible to me that the snake would be able to speak to Adam and Eve. They might have thought that that was strange – we're not given that detail or not – but it doesn't seem implausible with the other things that we're told about angels. And as far as the cherubim go . . .

Dr. Craig: Well, wait. Let's keep to one thing at a time. The question is: Is this plausibly interpreted as being some kind of paranormal phenomenon. There I think you're reading into it modern notions from your own experience with paranormal phenomena and so forth rather than how this would have been understood at that time. The way the snake is described is not as some kind of demonic being much less Satan or some sort of a god or anything. It's just *the wiliest of the wild animals that the Lord God has made*. And so while I do think that the snake could be a symbol for evil, nevertheless the symbol is a symbol of just an ordinary animal. It's just one of the wild animals or beasts of the field that God has made. I think that's a more plausible way to understand it than to read into it these paranormal phenomena.

Student: Is it absolutely necessary that the author of Genesis lay out from the very beginning and label the snake as Satan? Or, if we understand that Genesis was written in the same time period with the same cultural understanding as, say, let's say the book of Job where Satan is clearly identified as a being that does very specific things, then why would the snake need to be identified specifically as Satan whereas we could infer that pretty well.

Dr. Craig: Again, it is the way in which the snake is positively described, I think, that gives one pause. It's not just the absence of describing the snake as satanic or a demon, but it is the way in which it is described in purely natural terms as one of the wild animals that God has made and indeed the craftiest among them which wouldn't be compatible

with its being some sort of demon or Satan. Now, you wanted to say something about the cherubim. Why don't you say what you wanted to say about that.

Student: If somebody saw a talking snake they would say that's probably not a regular snake, but anyway. As far as the cherubim go, my understanding of those descriptions that you cited of the cherubim that come from mostly the major prophets (things with lions heads and wings and body of a man and all that sort of stuff), to me those prophetic visions – those are the figurative things that have symbolic meaning whereas in more historical and narrative accounts of angels they seem to appear as people.

Dr. Craig: Let me give you some references – I skipped over these because I didn't want to encumber the lesson with a bunch of Bible references. Remember I said that the cherubim are represented in the tabernacle and in the temple, even in the Holy of Holies itself. So this isn't late prophetic literature. This is Exodus 25:18-22 and Exodus 26:31, and then also 1 Kings 6:23-29. Given the prohibition in Israel of images of anything in heaven and on Earth that would be used in worship, it's very peculiar that you would have these statuettes of these beings represented in Israelite worship unless, as Sarna says, the reason is they don't represent anything real and therefore wouldn't violate the second commandment against images.

Student: Regarding the point about the snake, I was just thinking if you're going to interpret this literalistically, aren't you also going to have to be committed to the fact that ancient Israelites also believed that snakes were the craftiest of all creatures and surely that they probably had a better understanding of animals than that. I'm just thinking about Jesus talking about the mustard seed being the smallest of all mustard seeds. Clearly by making that point he's not trying to make a literal point about the mustard seed being the smallest of all seeds but he's making an overriding or an overall point regarding the kingdom of God. I'm just thinking maybe regarding the snake, maybe that's a hint that it's not . . .

Dr. Craig: Yes. I think that the point is a good one. I hadn't thought of it before. But I understand the point you're making, and that would be worth looking at. When you look at snakes in the Ancient Near East, they are used as symbols for a wide range of things, of both good and evil things. Snakes could be worshiped in Egypt, but then they could also represent evil and sinister powers and so forth. So snakes could be regarded as crafty and wicked and so forth, but you're making a good point as to whether or not even that statement shouldn't be taken literally but simply as part of the story.

Student: Where will I start? I'll start with snakes because we're on snakes, but you'd have to wipe out a lot of New Testament that identifies Satan as operating with the snake. Now the snake itself could be – it says it was the craftiest of all creatures. God could be attributing the style of its movements and the way it hides as something that as a tool

Satan would use to approach Eve because of the subtlety of movement and so forth, not necessarily anything related to the snake itself, but this is something Satan used. But then if you talk about other things like the rivers and so forth.

Dr. Craig: With respect to the snake, the word there that is translated “wily” or “crafty” is definitely a mental property. This is not attributing to the snake merely slithering movements in a physical way. This is attributing to the snake this mental property of being wily or crafty or smart. So the snake is definitely personified as an agent and it talks. So I don't think we can attribute that adjective to merely its bodily movements. Now you wanted to say something about whether it rained on the Earth prior to the creation of man.

Student: Just concluding the snake, then you would say Satan used the subtleties of the physical to accomplish spiritual things. But you'd have to negate a lot of New Testament that talks about the serpent deceiving Eve in the Garden.

Dr. Craig: Well, that's interesting. There is a passage I believe in [2] Corinthians where Paul says that, *I fear that just as the serpent deceived Eve so you might be deceived.*² He doesn't say, “just as Satan deceived Eve.” He says the serpent. So he's simply citing the story about the snake or the serpent in the Garden, and doesn't explicitly say Satan. I almost wish that he had because then it would make it clear but he's just citing this story about the serpent.

Student: There's other things in Revelation. I'd have to look at the concordance exhaustively to see what serpent references there are. But with respect to water, if you go up to Mount Hermon where Jesus told Peter that the gates of hell won't prevail against the church, there's water that gushes out that they call the gates of hell – the pagans – and it becomes a river. You have the same thing, for example Bennett Springs in Missouri, that this underground river comes out and becomes a huge river and body of water. So this doesn't seem unreasonable. And with respect to cherubim . . .

Dr. Craig: Well, now wait. Come on. Just because there are underground springs and aquifers, which Genesis affirms (Genesis 2 says a spring or something welled up out of the ground to water the land), that doesn't mean that it makes it plausible that therefore there was no rain. I mean, they understood the cycle of evaporation, clouds forming, and then rain falling. That's plausibly what the waters above referred to – was rain. So just the fact that there are certainly underground rivers and springs and so forth I don't think does anything to make it plausible that the Earth was utterly devoid of rain and clouds.

Student: Well, I don't think Genesis said there was no rain either specifically, but that there were occasions of this water coming from the ground and becoming . . .

² 2 Corinthians 11:3

Dr. Craig: Yes, and that's exactly what I'm questioning. I'm saying that that detail of the narrative is fantastic, and the ancient author would have found it so, I think, given his understanding of the water cycle.

Student: One more thing. Pain. I was listening to a sermon about was there pain before the Fall. This relates to taking the rib out. Because there are two references after the Fall. God says, *I'm going to multiply your pain in childbirth (not that you didn't have any, but I would multiply it)*. And the other thing would be if he put Adam to sleep to take some part of his DNA (and we'll call it a rib or whatever) what you could do with cloning in the modern sense but he closed up the side and he put Adam in a deep sleep. So if there wasn't an actual opportunity or there wasn't actually pain experienced by Adam he wouldn't have had to put him to sleep to take something out of the side . . . into a deep sleep to take something out of his side in order to make Eve.

Dr. Craig: Yes, I think that's quite right. And that wasn't a point that I was attempting to make. My point about the building of Eve out of Adam was that when you read it in context of this humanoid deity walking in the cool of the Garden looking for Adam and Eve hiding in the trees and so forth, that the surgery performed on Adam sounds very much like a physical operation which this God did – put him under general anesthetic (so to speak) so he wouldn't feel anything, cuts him open, takes out the rib or some body part, closes the incision up again, and then builds a woman out of this rib. That sounds like a physical operation that is going on. To say it's not, you would have to imagine that God is not physically present there, Adam falls asleep, an incision opens up on his side, a rib floats out into the air, and then the rib changes into a woman. Because, remember, God is immaterial – he's transcendent. So that would be, I think, not a plausible interpretation of the passage. When you read it in the context of the Garden, walking in the Garden, physically discoursing with people, it sounds like the formation of Eve is also a physical act which is going to require either, what someone mentioned earlier, that God becomes incarnate in chapter 2 or else this is just figurative language.

Student: I just have a quick comment and then two clarification questions. I haven't heard many people have a problem with that being a theophany in Genesis. I mean, people say that Jesus showed up as a theophany multiple times throughout the Old Testament – inside the furnace with Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, when he went and told Isaac not to be sacrificed. It seems like the way that it would make the most sense for him to interact with Adam and Eve would be as a theophany just like in other parts of the Old Testament. I just didn't see an issue there. As far as the serpent being Satan, it just seems like the curse upon the serpent, I mean any interpretation I've heard of the curse is a curse against Satan when it says *I will put enmity between you and the woman; between your seed and her seed*. This being a reference to the ongoing struggle between Satan throughout all the generations in between Jesus and the line going to Jesus. It just seems

like the curse that's put against the serpent would have to be Satan based on what the curse is.

Dr. Craig: Well, read the whole curse though upon the serpent beginning in verse 14. *Because you have done this, cursed are you above all cattle and above all wild animals.* That's what he was said to be. Right? The craftiest of the wild animals. *Upon your belly you shall go and dust you shall eat all the days of your life.* This sounds like an etiological explanation of why snakes slither on the ground – because God cursed them. And then, you're right, *I put enmity between you and the woman and your seed and her seed; he shall bruise your head and you shall bruise his heel.* Old Testament commentators divide on what this means. Taken literally, it describes enmity between snakes and humans and stomping on one with your heel to crush its head to kill it. If you take it literally this is very much talking about a sort of snake. Now, it's actually, in this case, it's the person who wants to take it as Satan who is interpreting it more figuratively and metaphorically to say that it refers to Satan. I'm open to that – that this is what that could be, especially if the snake is a symbol of something like that.

Student: I guess if Satan went into the serpent, you know took over the serpent, possessed the serpent or something, I guess I don't see it being a problem as the curse being against the serpent that he went into as well as Satan himself.

Dr. Craig: So both of them?

Student: Yeah. But, anyway, my clarification question is: I know the last few weeks you've drawn the parallel between other ancient cultures' origin stories and the Genesis origin story. So my point of clarification is: do you believe that the Hebrew origin story did come from God himself, or do you believe that the Hebrews needed an origin story so they made it up as well? Because if you believe that they just made it up then it doesn't seem like this is any better than anybody else's ancient culture story. But if you believe they didn't make it up and it came from God then it seems like the parallel only goes so far because you have to look at the source. One is people have to make it up out of scratch . . .

Dr. Craig: This relates to a question that was raised earlier. The author of Genesis on an orthodox Christian understanding of inspiration, which I have obviously affirmed in our class, is that God is the ultimate author of Genesis. The question then is: Can God use literary forms, literary genres, that are not literal? And there the answer is demonstrably yes! All you have to do is read the Psalms and see poetry, or read the book of Revelation. There's a kind of a nice comparison between the first book and the last book of the Bible. The last book of the Bible is Jewish apocalyptic literature filled with imagery. When it talks about the beast that is going to rebel against God, it doesn't mean something like in Disney's *Beauty and the Beast* – some sort of animal-like thing. This is a symbol for

some political leader. Right? And these multi-headed monsters that come out of the sea and try to take over the Earth are representative of nation-states and alliances and so forth. So clearly God uses different literary genres to communicate his truth. What I'm pleading for here is to consider the possibility that the first eleven chapters of Genesis belong to this literary genre which has been called mytho-history which doesn't require that it be interpreted literally any more than, say, the book of Revelation. But, obviously, I am affirming that God is the author of this history.

Student: I know you've made the parallel with Revelation, but apocalyptic literature and apocalyptic language is just so much of a genre of its own; in fact, it even says specifically that the dragon coming out of the sea is Satan or the devil. I mean, you don't have to draw that conclusion yourself. The verse actually says this represents Satan or the devil. It just reads completely differently. But, OK, my last clarification. Do you personally believe that there is a literal Adam and Eve who is the progenitor of the entire human race? Do you believe there was a literal Adam and Eve?

Dr. Craig: Yes. As I said, this isn't pure mythology. It's mytho-history. So the genealogies are intended to show that these are narratives or stories about people who actually lived and wrought. But I'm suggesting that these stories may have been told with metaphorical and figurative language that shouldn't be interpreted literalistically, and I've given several examples this morning of these.

Student: Concerning about the serpent. I was trying to say that if God tried to communicate with us about a spiritual phenomena as, say, Jesus was baptized by the Holy Spirit and it looks like a dove but obviously the Holy Spirit is not a dove but it looks like that. In this case it's a communication where I think the main message of eating that fruit is that human conscience has departed from agreement with God and that's why it's the knowledge of good and evil instead of defined good and evil by God's definition. We start that definition by our own selfish perspective. So this story is conveying that when human conscience has departed from God then there is no salvation because we are guided by our conscience except when a new conscience comes in Jesus Christ and replaces ours. I don't know how else Genesis can depict this idea other than what it has said in that Genesis – the fruit of knowledge of good and evil. Another interesting thing is that the Chinese character retained a lot of these stories in its radicals in their language. The pronoun “it” is derived by “snake.” So in the beginning if they describe you or I or it, that “it” is a snake. So I thought that was interesting.

Dr. Craig: OK, thank you.

Student: Aren't we hermeneutically bound to look into the apostolic authority of the New Testament and go back and get Old Testament meanings? Because I'm very sympathetic with what you're saying about the literary genre and all these Ancient Near Eastern

cultures with these theories, but if you take, say, Isaiah and you look at what Jesus or the New Testament authors are saying about that, they didn't think that's what Isaiah meant. "Out of Egypt I called my son." Matthew. When he said that, they didn't think that's what the Old Testament was referring to. So when in Revelation, not that I want to beat the snake to death, but in Revelation when the author says "Satan, that ancient serpent" I can see where we go back and nobody would have thought that – that the serpent was literally Satan. But because we have that progressive revelation, we as Christians, we have a *deus ex machina* in our pocket that no other culture has in this apostolic revelation – "oh, it's progressively revealed." So can't we – this Sarna fellow, I don't suppose he was a Christian. When did he write?

Dr. Craig: No, he's Jewish. Which is why I found his comments on the cherubim so interesting.

Student: I thought that was interesting because what you said about that – Jews broke the law all the time. The whole Old Testament is about how unfaithful they were so of course they might have had things like that. But he doesn't have the "Christian magic power" to go back and say, "Oh, but our apostles say this." So aren't we as Christians bound to go back through New Testament light to reinterpret these?

Dr. Craig: Yes, I think that's true. I think that's right. Although the examples that you gave lead me to think that in some ways the New Testament authors could read things into these texts that weren't originally there like "out of Egypt I have called my son." The hermeneutic there would be that they are discerning a different level of meaning or a different interpretation that wasn't intended by the original author. That raises all kinds of difficult questions pertinent to these things. I don't think that the New Testament references to Adam and Eve are going to overturn what I've said in this class because it primarily is a theological interpretation that Paul gives in Romans 5 about how sin entered into the world through Adam and Eve – through their choice, their Fall – and that therefore there was such a couple and that they did disobey God and fall away. But the degree to which the story is to be taken literalistically I think is left open by the New Testament. But you're certainly right in principle by saying that that needs to be taken into consideration.

Student: There's so much to be said but I'm going to pick back on the rain issue. Genesis 2 – the three major interpretations seem to be that, one would be it's a separate story than Genesis 1. One would be that it's a story of primarily what happened on day six. And one would be that it's consecutive in order, or follows in order from Genesis 1. I know you did a presentation on that not long ago disagreeing with that idea. I'm more inclined to think that it's a separate story, and that it begins similar to Genesis 1 in that it's telling what's wrong. There's no plant of the field; there's no plant of the Earth there. It's no good

plants and no wild plants. Then it gives a two-fold reason why that's the case – because God did not send rain and because there was nobody to irrigate the land. And then there's a two-fold solution – God causes it to begin to rain essentially and he creates man. So I think it's a separate story, just in a different order. So the “no rain” refers back to a time when God was creating the rain cycle in a similar fashion that he did on day 2. So I don't see them as seeing that as fantastic as much as it's just another telling of a creation story that may have been later in time than Genesis 1.

Dr. Craig: Well, that sounds very much like what I have just said! It's a separate story. I'm going to talk next week about the conflicts between Genesis 1 and 2 with respect to the order of creation – of vegetation, animals, and man. I'm sympathetic to what I think I understood you to say – that it's part of the plasticity of myths that they enable them to be told in different ways and that we shouldn't press this narrative to mean that before human beings were created it had never ever rained on the Earth. That, I think, would be fantastic even for these ancient Israelites who understood, as you say, the water cycle since the creation of the waters above and the waters below.

END DISCUSSION

All right. Good discussion today. Next week we will take up further evidence for the non-literal nature of these narratives.³

³Total Running Time: 43:40 (Copyright © 2019 William Lane Craig)