

§ 9. Excursus on Creation of Life and Biological Diversity

Lecture 21

Why Read Genesis 1-3 Figuratively?

In our last session together we saw that there are many elements in Genesis 1-3 which, if taken literally, seemed to be palpably false thereby recommending to us a figurative interpretation. Chief among these certainly are the anthropomorphic descriptions of God which are incompatible with the transcendent God described in chapter 1.

I want to say a word more about a question last week: whether we couldn't take Genesis 2 and 3 to be a theophany akin to the appearance of God to Abraham at the oaks of Mamre in Genesis 18. There are examples in the Old Testament like Genesis 18 where God appears to a person in human form. You have that in the appearance of the Lord to Abraham in Genesis 18. Let me suggest two reasons, however, why I think that Genesis 2 and 3 are not as plausibly interpreted as a theophany than as figurative language.

First of all, the Lord's anthropomorphic qualities in Genesis 2 and 3 are not presented as a theophany is. Look at how the language of theophany reads in Genesis 18:1-2. The author says,

And the Lord appeared to him by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the door of his tent in the heat of the day. He lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, three men stood in front of him.

By contrast, in Genesis 2 and 3 you don't have anything of language of theophany like this – of God's appearing to Adam and Eve, looking up and seeing him in the Garden.

Secondly, I think decisively, in Genesis 2 and 3 God is described anthropomorphically even when he is not appearing to Adam. This is the preeminent case in God's creation of Adam. In creating Adam he forms him out of the dust of the ground and then he blows into his nose the breath of life and Adam comes to life. This is clearly not an appearance of the Lord to Adam because Adam isn't even alive at that point, and yet God is described anthropomorphically. A second example would be God's creation of Eve. Adam is unconscious when this occurs. God puts Adam to sleep and then he performs this physical surgery on him to create Eve. So, again, this can't be an appearance to Adam because Adam is unconscious. It seems to me that neither of these are appearances of the Lord to Adam and that therefore this anthropomorphic language is more plausibly interpreted to be figurative in nature and not to be taken literally.

In addition to these elements in the narrative that if taken literally are palpably false, we also have certain *prima facie* inconsistencies (that is to say, face value inconsistencies) between the chapters 1 and 2 which were apparently of no concern whatsoever to the author of Genesis, such as the order of the creation of plants, animals, and man.

According to Genesis 2:5 there was no rain and hence no vegetation on Earth prior to the creation of man. Genesis 2:5-7 says,

when no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no herb of the field had yet sprung up—for the LORD God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no man to till the ground; but a mist went up from the earth and watered the whole face of the ground—then the Lord God formed man of dust from the ground . . .

According to this passage there was no rain and hence no vegetation prior to man's creation. But according to Genesis 1 God created vegetation on day 3 before he created man on day 6.

Some commentators have argued that there's really no inconsistency here concerning the vegetation prior to man because Genesis 2:5 is not referring to all types of vegetation, rather it's referring specifically to only two types of vegetation: thorns and grain. These are said to have come forth from the Earth only after the Fall as a consequence of God's cursing the ground. On this interpretation there was vegetation aplenty all over the Earth prior to man's creation, but there weren't any thorns and there weren't any grain. Those arise only after the Fall. But I think that this harmonization is too clever by half. On this reading, the reason given in Genesis 2:5 for why the Earth had not brought forth thorns and grain should have been “for man had not yet sinned.” Since the world was supposedly filled with vegetation at that time, the absence of rain and the absence of any man to till the ground had nothing to do with it. Moreover, man was commanded to till the Garden prior to the Fall – Genesis 2:15 gives him the command to till the Garden – which would imply that the growth of grain was not delayed until after the Fall. So I think it's far more plausible to think that Genesis 2:5 envisions an exhaustive distinction between uncultivated plants on the one hand and cultivated plants on the other hand, and therefore no vegetation at that time.

Similarly, in Genesis 1 God creates the animals prior to his creation of man, but in Genesis 2:18-19 God creates man before creating the animals. Genesis 2:18-19 state,

Then the Lord God said, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him.” So out of the ground the Lord God formed every beast of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name.

It would have been very easy for the author of Genesis to bring the account of the creation of man in chapter 2 into accord with the account in Genesis 1 rather than to leave these apparent inconsistencies concerning the order of the creation of man and the animals. The Jewish commentator Umberto Cassuto says that the author of Genesis could

not have failed to notice what he calls “so glaring a contradiction” in the order of creation of the animals if such a contradiction exists. So Cassuto rejects the harmonizing translation of chapter 2 verse 19 as animals which “He *had* already created” as being unworthy of serious consideration. Cassuto assumes that cattle or domestic animals must have already been with man in the Garden whereas the beasts of the field and the birds of the air being wild animals were not in the Garden. So what chapter 2 verse 19 envisions is the Lord's creating what Cassuto calls “particular specimens” of these wild animals in order to present them to man in the Garden. So, for example, although there were crocodiles outside the Garden, there weren't any in the Garden and so God creates a specimen of a crocodile and lets Adam give it a name. There were hippopotami outside the Garden, but God creates a specimen hippopotamus in the Garden so that Adam can give it a name. There were lions outside the Garden, but God creates a specimen lion in the Garden so that Adam can give it a name. I'll leave it up to you to decide whether you think this is a plausible interpretation of the passage. The overriding point remains that were the author concerned with consistency he would surely have avoided such a glaring contradiction by making such a scenario as Cassuto envisions evident to the reader and making it a whole lot clearer.

Why was the author so blasé about these apparent inconsistencies? Well, plausibly because he didn't intend his story to be read literalistically. Given the plasticity of myths (and you will remember that refers to their variability and the way they could be told), different ways of telling the stories were possible so long as the same fundamental truth was expressed.

START DISCUSSION

Student: I haven't, of course, studied this literature in Hebrew but just reading the passage where he talks about the naming of the cattle, it seems to me contrived to interpret that as strictly as conflicting with the creation of animals. That seems to me like a leap justified maybe by an ulterior motive when interpreting the language and maybe to justify other interpretations of Scripture.

Dr. Craig: I'm surprised you would say that, quite honestly, because it seems to me the *prima facie* reading is that he creates man first and then he creates the animals and brings them to him. Cassuto, as I said, says this is a glaring contradiction if there is a contradiction here, and it has been noticed by every commentator on Genesis.

Student: It doesn't say created or that he first created them or anything like that in that verse about the naming. So I'm not sure where there would be a contradiction between the creation of the animals and a second creation later when the second instance doesn't reference creation.

Dr. Craig: OK, well, that is the solution that Cassuto is preferring – that there weren't any of these animals in the garden and so, in effect, there occurs a kind of second creation of these specimens for Adam to name. While I wouldn't know how to refute that, I think you need to simply ask yourself: is that the most plausible interpretation of it? You've got a different order, it looks like with the vegetation, the animals, and man, and so there needs to be some account given of why the order is apparently contradictory.

Student: It seems to me like Genesis 1 is more sequential ordering of God's creation and that chapter 2 is expanding on certain aspects of the creation, not necessarily trying to tie them to an order or chronology. That's where the problem seems to be.

Dr. Craig: Right, and that's exactly the point that I'm making.

Student: I would see this is not conflicting with Genesis 1 in the sequence of creation but that he's pulling details out in chapter 2 of the creation. He's dealing with some subsets of this; some expansion of the responsibilities of man.

Dr. Craig: I think that is right. Yes. But the odd thing is that when he does this expansion there's a different order of creation than you have in Genesis 1 where you have first the vegetation on day 3, then you have the terrestrial animals on day 6, and then finally man is the crown of creation, whereas in Genesis 2 you have first man is created in the Garden, and then the vegetation is created, and then the animals are created and brought to man. So there's at least an apparent conflict here that needs to be resolved. I tend to agree with what you just said at the beginning that he's not concerned with chronology here so much that it doesn't matter if they're ordered chronologically or told in the exact sequence.

Student: We agree with that. I think in the second chapter he's not trying to . . . he's presupposing these things are made and then he's picking out aspects of it to expand upon rather than say, *I'm ordering this again in a different way than Genesis 1.*

Dr. Craig: OK.

Student: Can I go back to the theophany? I just had a couple of questions on that. Number one: in chapter 2 I've never read the text or understood chapter 2 to imply that there was a theophany there. It just seems like God is doing things in a smaller location and not just on a worldwide scale like he is in chapter 1 at the transcendent scale. It's only in that little brief mention in chapter 3 where it says he's walking around. So I don't know if maybe there are commentaries that suggest that chapter 2 is meant to be understood as God actually being in the Garden down on his knees making a man-castle out of the sand. But the other thing I wanted to suggest, too, was that even in the context of Genesis I don't think . . . because you mentioned that later the theophanies are singled out as “the Lord appeared to them” in this way, but there is a verse in Genesis 4:26 that says that that was

the point that men began to call upon the name of the Lord. It seems to suggest that the implication seems to be that at some point God was actually visible to people. They knew he was there. He was around. But sometime after Cain murdered Abel and the consequences resulting from that, God began to be hidden from them and they had to start calling on him to find him.

Dr. Craig: Let me address these in reverse order. I don't think that last point is at all a plausible interpretation. I think what it's talking there is about the names of God. In Chapter 1, the word for God is Elohim and then in chapter 2 you have the LORD introduced – Yahweh Elohim. I think when he's saying that men began to call upon the name of the LORD it means upon the name of Yahweh. This is actually another one of these apparent inconsistencies because later when he appears to Moses it seems that the divine name has been hidden until that time when Moses is given the revelation of the divine name. Commentators have really struggled to try to understand this. With respect to the first point, I certainly agree with you that the anthropomorphism in chapter 2 is more implicit and subtle, and it only really emerges inescapably in chapter 3 when you've got God walking in the cool of the Garden and calling out to Adam and looking for him hiding in the trees. But when you read chapter 2 in light of chapter 3 I think then it's very plausible that chapter 2 is also anthropomorphic. He forms the man out of the dust of the Earth and then he blows into his nose the breath of life and the earthen man becomes alive. That, I think, is a very physical description especially when read in light of chapter 3 which is inescapably physical.

Student: I guess I just don't understand why that would . . . even if chapter 2 was suggesting a theophany, I don't see why it would be somehow less significant than God appearing later to other people.

Dr. Craig: Maybe you didn't understand my point. I'm saying that chapter 2 is not a theophany because there was no one being appeared to there. We have simply an anthropomorphic description of God creating Adam and animating the earthen (I'm tempted to say “statue” – I don't know what word to use) figure, and it comes alive. There isn't any appearing in that act because Adam isn't alive yet. It's for that reason I think chapter 2 is not a theophany, but I do think it's anthropomorphic, that is to say, described in human terms.

Student: It sounds like you're OK with us making comment regards to last week, so I just wanted to say – the thing that stuck with me that bothered me a little bit from last week is I think that in some aspects you're misrepresenting the views of the literal interpretation, like in aspects to sound especially silly or foolish. Like, for instance, people who believe in the historical accuracy of the Genesis account don't believe the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil was some kind of magical fruit that granted supernatural

powers. I mean, that was just about disobedience. All we know about the Tree is that if they ate from it – because they were given free will they had the option of disobeying God – and when they disobeyed God they would naturally be granted the knowledge of good and evil because there was no evil in the world before sin came into them.

Dr. Craig: What about immortality? It seems to me that there you definitely have the idea that eating the fruit is going to confer on your body immortality, and that's not from God because it's against God's will. He says, *We've got to keep them out of the Garden lest they go in and eat the fruit and become immortal*. So it sounds like it's magic fruit to me.

Student: Well, there's the Tree of Life and then there's the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Those are two separate trees. I'm referring to the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. It doesn't have to be interpreted in such a literal manner, just like we don't believe that when the curse put upon the serpent or Satan when it says about *you'll strike his heel you'll smash his head*, I mean nobody who believes the literal interpretation believes that that's telling us today how humans should kill snakes when we see them. There can be some obvious symbolism and foreshadowing there in the curse without saying that the entire event was metaphorical and never happened. It's just one big symbol. I just don't want the literal interpretation to be misrepresented, and by going so literal it just makes it sound silly and stupid.

Dr. Craig: All right, well it sounds as though what you would call literal interpretation is taking a step in the direction that I'm pleading for – namely, some sort of figurative or metaphorical interpretation. The question would be the extent I suppose to which one would go, but that's fair enough.

Student: I'd like to at least end with two quick questions that are kind of combined. I understand that you believe in a literal Adam and Eve but you don't believe that the events or the facts surrounding them or the characters leading up to Abraham are necessarily literally true. So I guess my question is what is your litmus test in deciding which parts are literally true and which parts are going to be symbolic metaphors?

Dr. Craig: I'm going to address that in a minute.

Student: OK, then let me just tack on this question that maybe you'll be able to address, too. For the parts that you do believe are symbols or metaphors, do we know what they are symbols or metaphors for?

Dr. Craig: I'm going to address that in a minute.

Student: If the Fall didn't happen because Adam and Eve ate from the Tree, then how did the Fall actually happen? I don't understand why God would give us all these symbols and metaphors while leaving us totally clueless as to what actually happened in the actual events.

Dr. Craig: All right, well, hang on and see if you're satisfied with what I'm going to share.

Student: How could saying Seth is 912 years old be a metaphor or symbol for something else that we are clueless about? I'm still struggling with that.

Dr. Craig: OK.

Student: I hope this is not too far afield but having just come back from the West and Colorado and studying the Indians, I'm curious. Their myths stories of creation about the Great Spirit and stories about how the animals came to be and that God provided the buffalo and so forth for provisioning for man and their respect for nature as a result they saw God very much involved (or the Great Spirit) in nature. I guess my question is: they have their own myths, if you will, of creation and origin. Is there any in some way correlation whereby early man (prehistoric man) through oral tradition were told these myths as in Genesis from the Jewish tradition. Are there some parallels or symbolisms? I know we talked about Egypt, but it is curious to me there are some common elements throughout all of these myths and there's a way that the people groups understood it, particularly I think in the Indian culture. I don't think they took these so literally as we tend to try to in the West, but they saw them as important, true stories of their people. Do you feel there's some sort of connection, if you will, with this kind of view of early creation?

Dr. Craig: We have no way of knowing the answer to that because these are pre-literary traditions and so they're not written down until you get to the ancient Babylonian and Sumerian myths which are around 3,000 BC, 2,000 BC, and then you've got these Hebrew stories as well. These are among the earliest. But before that, you mentioned I think prehistoric man – precisely because it's prehistoric we don't know.

Student: I'm just thinking of the migration into North America and South America 2,000 years ago when the Indian tribes were settled, and their stories are very similar amongst the tribes of creation and the Great Spirit. It just seems to be a common theme.

Dr. Craig: Let me say this. It is very difficult, as I said earlier, to draw causal connection between these. You'll remember I describe this affliction called parallelomania where scholars too often see similarities and draw then causal connections. I'm very skeptical about that ability. But, having said that, I think the point that you're making is a good one – all of these myths have certain common characteristics in the grand themes that they teach. There's an account of creation – where did everything come from? There's an account often of the origin of mankind – why do human beings exist and what is the purpose for human beings? The Flood narrative is very widespread around the world in different peoples including you have in Indian culture. So there are certain grand themes that I think are relevant in classifying the genre or the type of literature that Genesis 1-11 is.

Student: I think interestingly a lot of them have a monotheistic kind of umbrella, and it seems to me that when you get later in history is when you get more into the pantheistic . . .

Dr. Craig: I'm not an anthropologist. I know that that's been a much controverted and disputed question: is monotheism or polytheism more primitive? I'm not in a position to have an opinion on that.

Student: Just for clarification because I just don't know what this means – when you say the text is anthropomorphic, what are you saying?

Dr. Craig: Let's unpack that word. The word “anthropomorphic” comes from two Greek words. One is *anthropos* which means “man” or “human,” and then *morphē* is the word for “form.” So an anthropomorphic description is a description of something in human form. That's what we've got in Genesis 2 and 3 – anthropomorphic descriptions of God, whom we know doesn't have a human form from chapter 1 so they can't be literal unless it's a theophany of God appearing in a human form.

Student: I was always confused because I always thought theophany was actually that – coming in human form.

Dr. Craig: No, I think you can see the difference here. Theophany comes from other Greek words that are instructive, too. *Theos* means God, and then I think it's *phainó* which means “to appear.” So this will be an appearance of God to a person, and he could appear in different guises though often in Scripture God appears in some sort of human form like Genesis 18. So the one is, as it were, a linguistic category, and the other is a phenomenal category.

Student: Getting on the subject of metaphor, as I understand it there are actually competing accounts for the necessary and sufficient conditions for a metaphor. For example, there are what's called a brute force account. A brute force account would say they are something more akin to truth making. There's this metaphor and there's something in the actual world that must correspond with it in some way. Then there are other accounts, for example, that say that if I have a metaphor maybe there are artifacts in the metaphor. There's nothing in the metaphor itself that corresponds to the actual world. I just want to know where you're going to get on that.

Dr. Craig: I don't have a view on that. My inclination would be toward the one that says that it doesn't need to have a corresponding thing in reality. I'd like to be able to just immediately think of one off the top of my head of a metaphor that we use.

Student: I'm thinking about a mist. The mist that you said rising from the ground. I probably don't think that that corresponds to anything.

Dr. Craig: No, I was trying to think of someone who might use metaphors that don't correspond to something like sometimes people will say that something is a blooming, buzzing confusion. I don't think that there's any such thing in reality as a blooming, buzzing confusion. That's just a kind of metaphorical way of describing something that's unclear. Surely there must be examples if we were to put our heads together of metaphors we could think of that don't have concrete reference like, for example, she has a bee in her bonnet. That seems very literal, doesn't it at first? It refers to an insect in a hat. She's got a bee in her bonnet. But it doesn't mean that. It means she's angry or irritable or something.

Student: But in that case it corresponds to something.

Dr. Craig: Yes, exactly. So my inclination would be to say that we could think of metaphors that don't have those kind of concrete reference in them.

Student: Speaking about metaphors, how long do you think that this extends into the book of Genesis? All the way up to the point of let's say Noah's Ark?

Dr. Craig: I do think that the first eleven chapters are the kind of clear breaking point. All commentators on Genesis notice that Genesis has a structure that is tripartite, that is to say three parts. 1 to 11 is the primeval history, then after that you have the patriarchal narratives, and then finally you have the story of Joseph which is the end. The primeval history (the first eleven chapters) stand markedly apart from the patriarchal narratives in their similarity to ancient myths and the employment of etiological motifs like founding present realities in the deep past. After chapter 11 these kinds of similarities and motifs just don't exist. So everybody seems to recognize that the first eleven chapters are set apart in that sense.

Student: This is just a simple question. In the language of 19, it says "out of the ground the Lord God formed every beast." You're saying that that puts it out of sequence. In the Hebrew, if you said in English "out of the ground the Lord God had formed every beast and then brought them to me" it is not much of a change but I was just wondering if you could detect that in the Hebrew.

Dr. Craig: It's permitted but not detectable, I think. Remember I quoted Cassuto (himself a Jewish commentator) who said that this alternative isn't to be taken seriously. It's just a harmonizing attempt to mistranslate the passage so that it looks like that God has already formed the animals by putting it in past-perfect tense. Now, linguistically, yes that verb could be given that kind of past-perfect tense. But when you read the whole story, when you read the context, is that the best way to translate it or just simply translate it as a simple past – that now this is the point at which God is creating the beasts? Most translators and commentators would, I think, agree with Cassuto in rejecting the

harmonizing translation on the basis of the context. It's just an isolated linguistic point apart from contrast that the verb would permit multiple ways of rendering it.

Student: But it does permit it. And chapter 1 is clear in day 1, day 2, day 3. This is not day 1, day 2, day 3, and it could use the past-perfect tense or whatever it is. So it would make sense that since he had created them he brought them.

Dr. Craig: I don't think that it makes as much sense as reading it as just not a past-perfect, but the isolated linguistic point is right. It permits it. That's true.

Student: One question about rain, because it does say it didn't rain. I think last week or the week before you said the people that read this would have known about the water cycle and all of that kind of stuff so it wouldn't make sense to write that. I think if someone were writing it to make it seem like it fits in with what everybody knows then yes indeed that's correct. But if they were writing it as, *This is what happened and this is how it worked*, then having something like the mist was used to water everything and there wasn't rain, it seems like if you were writing it to say, *Hey, this worked the way it was before*, you would say there was rain. If you were trying to make it up, you would say it was rain. But since it says, no, there wasn't rain and there was mist, I think we could take that as literally true.

Dr. Craig: I do think that it should be understood in a sense literally. He is saying there was no rain. But I question whether or not the author really meant us and his readers to think that there was a period within Earth history in which it had never rained on the face of the Earth because he understood that if you have rivers and seas and evaporation that there were formed clouds and it's going to rain. When he refers to the waters above, in the Old Testament that is referring, I think, to rain and rain clouds, and they understood that that's where the waters above are and where rain comes from.

Student: I tend to reject uniformitarianism. I tend to say that something that happened back here that were being revealed could be very different than the way it happens today. So that doesn't bother me as much, I guess.

END DISCUSSION

All right. We're out of time.¹

¹ ?Total Running Time: 37:58 (Copyright © 2019 William Lane Craig)