

§ 9. Excursus on Creation of Life and Biological Diversity

Lecture 27

Scientific Evidence Pertinent to the Origin and Evolution of Biological Complexity

Today we come to our summary and conclusion of our hermeneutical section on the exploration of creation and evolutionary theory. I think you can see from the various biblical interpretations of Genesis 1 that we've surveyed that there's quite a range of alternatives available to Bible-believing Christians which have been advanced by evangelical scholars. It's not the case that we are forced or boxed into just one interpretation that is valid and binding for anyone who is a Bible-believing Christian. There's quite a number of possible interpretations of Genesis.

Now, you might say to me, then which of these interpretations is the best, if any of them? Well, it seems to me that the two most plausible interpretive options are the literal Young Earth Creationist interpretation and the mytho-historical interpretation. Of these two, I find the mytho-historical interpretation to provide a better genre analysis of Genesis 1-11 for the reasons that I've shared and therefore to be the better of the two options. But I want to emphasize that I present this view merely as a plausible alternative for your consideration. We can, and we should be, open to various options.

START DISCUSSION

Student: Do you have any comment about C. S. Lewis's view of myth? He talked about that in several of his writings. As I understand it, he said that when he was an atheist (in the atheist phase of his life), he regarded all religions as myth. And then later came to see Christianity as a true myth. He, I think, described the resurrection where a god dies to redeem people as having features of a myth, but true for him (not just myth). I wondered if you drew any parallels between his views and your views.

Dr. Craig: Just recently a friend (who is something of a Lewis aficionado) sent me a fairly long paper he had written precisely on Lewis's attitude toward myth and the Bible. I was surprised to discover that Lewis adopts very much the sort of view that I've argued for under the mytho-historical interpretation. He thinks that these events happened (that they were real people) but he thinks that they have been portrayed in the language of myth and symbol. Lewis, I think, has helped to soften the evangelical community to this point of view. He did not take the narratives of Genesis 1-11 in a literalistic fashion but regarded them as divinely inspired myths. What I would want to add is that it's not just myth; it's mytho-history. There is an interest in history here, and so they cannot be equated simply with myth. If you're interested in pursuing that, look at Lewis' *Reflections on the Psalms*. A lot of the quotations that my friend shared with me were from his *Reflections on the Psalms*.

END DISCUSSION

Now we want to turn to a consideration of the scientific evidence pertinent to the origin and evolution of biological complexity. As we do so, it's important to remember that our concern here is not – is not! – to present some sort of design argument for the existence of God or indeed any kind of intelligent designer. We're not doing natural theology. Here we are doing systematic theology; that is to say, we're asking: Given the truth of the divine revelation in the Bible, how is the scientific evidence concerning the origin and evolution of biological complexity to be integrated with our theology? So ours is an integrative project beginning with the truths of theology and then asking how the data of modern science can best be integrated with it.

From what I've already said, I think it's evident that unless one adopts the literal Young Earth Creationist interpretation, Genesis 1 doesn't really say anything about how God created life on Earth. The Genesis account doesn't really explain anything about the mechanisms by which God created. In fact, in two places, as we've seen, the account says that God declared let the *Earth* bring forth (in one case vegetation and in the other case terrestrial animals) suggesting that there may indeed be natural causes in bringing these things forth. So it seems to me that unless we adopt the Young Earth Creationist's literal interpretation, there is no incompatibility between Genesis 1 and scientific theories about the origin and evolution of life.

If we do adopt the Young Earth Creationist interpretation then it seems we have no choice but to radically revise the doctrine of inspiration so that the text either (1) is consistent with teaching error – that though inspired, the Scriptures teach error, or (2) we could say that the antiquated science and history in Scripture is not part of the teachings of Scripture so that Scripture is not in error in what it teaches but it doesn't teach the antiquated science and history that is found in Genesis 1-11. For Young Earth Creationism is not merely incompatible with evolutionary biology; rather, as creation scientists themselves recognize, Young Earth Creationism is in massive conflict with modern science, history, and linguistics. They therefore have to propose an utterly different alternative science and history that is frequently bizarre. I don't want to dwell on the negatives in this class but those of you who are tempted by creation science should understand just how wild it is. You need to look at it with open eyes. The idea that the universe is only six to ten thousand years old would not only force us to abandon modern geology, paleontology, archaeology, and dating techniques, but it would make it impossible for us even to see the stars at night since light has not had sufficient time to travel from the stars to Earth. In order to explain a fact so simple as that we can see the stars at night Young Earth Creationists have had to propose implausible alternative cosmologies. For example, some have said that the universe is an expanding rotating ball of matter in empty space with our solar system located at its center. Now, never mind that such a model fails to deliver on its promises of how we can see starlight coming from

galaxies that are billions of light years away, the more fundamental point that I'm making is that Young Earth Creationists, in order to explain a phenomenon so simple as that you can see the stars at night, are forced to revamp the entire universe. It doesn't just stop there. Take for example the attempt to explain away the Earth's sedimentation on the basis of so-called flood geology – Noah's Flood. The idea that there was ever a worldwide flood that destroyed all terrestrial life on Earth and laid down the Earth's sediments is a fantasy. For a devastating critique of flood geology I would just commend to you Hugh Ross' *Navigating Genesis* in which he has one chapter devoted to a scientific critique of flood geology.

Just how bizarre Young Earth Creationism is becomes evident from reading Jonathan Sarfati's Young Earth Creationist commentary on Genesis 1-11. In order to explain flood geology Sarfati supposes that after the flood the animals that Noah had taken on board disembark and then filled the entire world. Now, how do you suppose that the hippopotami on board made it from the mountains of Turkey where the ark landed to the rivers of Central Africa or how the little koala bears and platypuses crawled all the way from Turkey to Australia or the sloths to South America. Well, Sarfati's answer is that plate tectonics had not yet separated the supercontinent into the world's separate continents thus enabling the animals to migrate to their various habitats. But they had to do it in a hurry. All the continental drift and mountain building such as the raising of Mount Everest all took place rapidly since the flood just a few thousand years ago. What about the dinosaurs, you might ask? Well, since they were contemporaneous with Noah he must have taken them on board the ark, too. Sarfati solves the problem of room on board by suggesting that Noah took juvenile specimens – two of every genus. Not two of every species; two of every genus. Now, since there were at least 500 dinosaur genera, Noah must have had at least a thousand dinosaurs on board the ark which he then released into the world upon disembarkation. Just think about that for a minute. Only three hundred and sixty seven years separate the Flood from the call of Abraham – three hundred sixty seven years. That means that the whole history of dinosaur evolution and speciation plus extinction took place in less than four hundred years unless we are to think that there were still dinosaurs roaming the Earth at the time of Abraham. Truly Young Earth Creationists live in a different universe than most of us do. This is crank science and Christians should not be attracted to it.

Leaving aside Young Earth Creationism, there is on other interpretations no incompatibility between Genesis 1 and scientific theories about the origin and evolution of life.

START DISCUSSION

Student: I was reminded that in Genesis 7 it says and then restates multiple times: *and all flesh died that moved upon the Earth. All in whose nostrils was the breath of life and those on the dry land died and every living substance was destroyed which was on the face of the ground. Both man and cattle and the creeping things and the fowl of heaven and they were destroyed from the Earth and Noah only remained alive and they that were with him in the ark.* So talking about compatibility – how would you describe the compatibility of those very clear verses that reference the whole Earth directly with the idea that there wasn't a flood where everything died.

Dr. Craig: The verses you cite illustrate the very point I'm making. If we adopt a literal interpretation of the Flood story then this is in massive, massive conflict with modern science – with geology, paleontology, the distribution of animals around the world, dinosaur evolution and extinction, all the things that I've just mentioned. As I say, given that massive conflict, it seems to me that the person who adopts a Young Earth Creationist interpretation of these passages has little choice but to either revise the doctrine of inspiration so that the inspiration of Scripture is consistent with Scripture's teaching error, or he could say that these scientific and historical facts are not part of the teaching of Scripture but are just the sort of husk in which these deeper scriptural truths are embodied but aren't really part of what Scripture intends to teach and therefore don't represent errors. Either of those alternatives is a huge revision of the doctrine of inspiration which I think we ought to be very reluctant to adopt. That's one reason I favor the mytho-historical interpretation. It will not force those kinds of revisions in the doctrine of inspiration, but it will require you to read the passage in a non-literal way.

Student: I think one of the things that we have to wonder about is our ability to know exactly what the facts are so far back that a model has to be created for it. There was no one there to see it. I mean, the facts are not repeatable facts like we do in science. It's a model that says, oh, well, this is how we believe the world works and this is how evolution works and this is how geology works – it couldn't have happened this way. So you have to start by saying I believe in the science models of climate change – no, I don't – and in all kinds of models because there was no one back there, and to be able to repeat it in the scientific principle of repeatability. I think maybe there might be a better way that says the Bible is my source of truth and I'll take that as the beginning.

Dr. Craig: I think the difficulty with that partly is that, while you're right that for the theories of the early universe such as the ones that I mentioned that attempt to explain how we can see the stars are based on mathematical models, when it comes to this flood geology now you are talking about historical epochs where people were alive. As I said, there's only three hundred sixty-seven years between the Flood and Abraham. So you've got to squeeze in the whole history of dinosaur evolution and extinction into less than four hundred years and that is a historical epic. That's not based on modeling. There were

people around at that time. It seems to me that the prospects for creation science are extremely dim, and that's why I said I think if you're going to go with this interpretation you're going to need to revise your doctrine of inspiration because I think there's little hope for an alternative science.

Student: What you're saying is you assume that the Bible is wrong. Just like when we said the Bible says that they lived to be hundreds of years and we don't have the mechanism for knowing how did that happen and all so it couldn't happen because it doesn't happen today. I say: it says it happened, it happened.

Dr. Craig: I'm not assuming that the Bible is wrong. On the contrary, I said that the two most plausible interpretations of these passages is either the literal Young Earth view or the mytho-historical view. What I would say is that in light of modern science, history, and linguistics, the literalistic interpretation is falsified. So one isn't assuming that it's false. Rather, it's saying that in light of the evidence that we have it has been falsified. There was no worldwide flood a few thousand years ago that destroyed all terrestrial life. And you can't squeeze plate tectonics and mountain building into a few hundred years between the Flood and the call of Abraham. So I just would plead with folks who are attracted by this interpretation to realize what it's going to cost. There's a really high cost attached to this view, I think.

Student: It's been a while since I've done any reading on this but some of these passages about the Flood and so forth I had read a while back that the language that's translated "in the whole Earth" and so forth could have related more to a local flood. It didn't have to be translated in exactly those words. Could this – and I'm not doing a very good job of explaining but – could this have been a more local flood?

Dr. Craig: That is a possibility that has been defended, for example, by Hugh Ross in his *Navigating Genesis*. Ross argues that the flood was intended to be merely a local flood in Mesopotamia. I am like our previous questioner though here who said that the language of Genesis 6-9 just doesn't seem to be consistent with a local flood. It talks about how all life under the heavens was destroyed. The picture there is that the world has returned to the primordial state of Genesis 1:2 where it was covered by this primeval ocean and then, as it were, creation begins anew with Noah and his family afterwards and the animals on board the ark. Much as I would like a local flood interpretation to be true, I just can't convince myself that that is the correct reading of the passage. If you're interested in a discussion of this, take a look at John Walton's book *The Lost World of the Flood* co-authored with Tremper Longman in which he argues similarly that the local flood interpretation of the narrative is not the most plausible interpretation, but nevertheless he doesn't think that there was a worldwide flood. He thinks that the author is using hyperbole and exaggeration. I agree with Walton that it's not describing a local flood but

a worldwide flood, but I don't think this is best to be explained simply by appeal to hyperbole and exaggeration. Rather, I think that it's to be accounted for by the mytho-historical genre of this literature that doesn't intend or require that it be read in a literal way.

Student: I'm just kind of confused. You talk about a geological flood worldwide but that a local flood also doesn't seem possible. I'm just kind of confused. What other option would it be then?

Dr. Craig: To say that it is not intended to be taken literally.

Student: That's what I'm trying to get at. What exactly would that mean then?

Dr. Craig: It would mean that this is a mytho-historical account of the destruction of the world showing God's displeasure with human sinfulness and his being counted upon to bring judgment upon evil and sin but then also showing the grace of God in preserving this one family so that wherever there is the judgment of God it's always tempered with a measure of grace. I think that's the deeper lesson to be learned from the story.

Student: Another point that you'd have to throw out I think is the science of coming to understand DNA and the transition and the migration of peoples across the world. They can trace using DNA markers – they have a pretty good idea of when people left Africa and went into Asia and Europe and North America and it wasn't 3,000 years ago.

Dr. Craig: Yes. There was a news release just this week that Jan showed me that said scientists have dated remains in Idaho to about 16,500 years ago – that's before the end of the last ice age. These peoples had migrated from Asia apparently down the Pacific coast and then began to settle in the Americas already 16,500 years ago. So you're quite right about the mass migrations of human beings that were taking place even prior to the end of the ice age.

Student: Having read a little bit of people like Michael Licona and all that, this idea that there might be hyperbolic, I would say, descriptions in Scripture of say like the horses in Solomon's stables, things like that where you would just say, yes, there was a ton of this. Or everybody got killed by Samson's ass jawbone. All that stuff. There's things like that that . . . would you say that the event itself perhaps may be founded upon in fact but that the description is hyperbolic of the effect that it had?

Dr. Craig: OK, I thank you for that clarification. That would be Walton and Longman's view of the Flood. They would say that this is written in hyperbolic, exaggerated language that they think Ancient Near Eastern peoples would have recognized. The dimensions of the ark, for example, are so huge that the people back then would have recognized no single human being could have built such a thing. And Walton gives some accounts of the Creation Museum – in, is it Kentucky? – that required all this massive

construction equipment and everything to build the replica of the ark. He says the people back then would have known that no human being could have built something this large. So these dimensions weren't taken in a literal way. So that would be their view that it's hyperbole and exaggeration for effect, as it were, of an event that actually took place. I want to clarify as well, I think it's very plausible that there is some kind of local flood that lies at the historical root of the story. It could have been, for example, as some have hypothesized, the flooding of the Black Sea basin. When the waters of the Mediterranean burst through the Straits of Bosphorus and there was a catastrophic flooding of the Black Sea – that could have been remembered. Or the Persian Gulf at the end of the last ice age because so much of the water of the Earth was in the form of glaciers, the sea levels were lower so that the Persian Gulf was a green oasis. The Straits of Hormuz were the coastline at the end of the last ice age. And what happened was as the glaciers melted the sea levels rose and the Persian Gulf was formed. It was inundated. Some have suggested this could be at the root of these flood stories that are common to Mesopotamia and the Hebrew Bible and so forth. So, yeah, I do want to affirm that there could well be historical events at the root of this. But that it was worldwide seems to be ruled out by scientific evidence. Now, I'm not persuaded that Walton and Longman are right in just saying this is mere hyperbole. That seems overly simplistic to me. They might be right with regard to the dimensions of the ark, but for the whole thing I suspect that it's to be explained by the genre of writing that this is, namely it's not simply a straightforward literalistic historical account, but it's a mytho-historical account.

Student: What would you say about things like the Tower of Babel or, for example, Eleazar's sword being stuck to his hand against the Philistines? I think that's in 2 Samuel.

Dr. Craig: OK, that's not in Genesis 1-11. So let's stick with Genesis 1-11 and the Tower of Babel. You'll remember I said that taken literalistically these stories would be in massive conflict with science, history, and linguistics. That third point was what I was thinking of with regard to the Tower of Babel. The idea that all human languages originated relatively recently through an event at a Babylonian ziggurat is just completely impossible given what modern linguists know about the origin of the various language groups that exist in the world. I would say something very similar there. Again, it's very interesting. What the literalists often do is to try to localize the phenomenon in order to save it. They save it by localizing it. *Well, there wasn't a worldwide flood – it was a local flood. It isn't the origin of all the world's languages – it's just that the people at that Babylonian ziggurat had their languages confused.* But, again, when you read it in the context of Genesis 10 it seems to be teaching that the peoples of the world – that's where the different languages originated, in the confusion of tongues at Babel. And prior to that everybody spoke a universal human language. I appreciate the motivation. I feel it myself! I mean, I want to affirm that these stories are true, but I don't think you can save

truth by the device of trying to interpret them as merely local events. As our friend back here said, I don't think the language of the narratives are going to permit that. And they do the same thing with the Garden of Eden. *It's not true that there was no rain on Earth or that there was no vegetation before Adam was created. It's just a local story. There wasn't any rain in the Garden. There wasn't any vegetation there.* Despite the universalizing statements of the narratives. This is a consistent hermeneutical pattern. You try to save literal truth by localizing it, and I'm not persuaded that that's legit. I think it's better to say that what we're dealing with here is with a genre of literature that doesn't need to be pressed for a kind of wooden literalism.

END DISCUSSION

Alright. I said that had to be the last sentence, but I'm going to be here next week and we'll continue this discussion. I realize that this material is challenging. It's challenging to me as well, honestly. I've really struggled and wrestled with this, but I'm sharing with you the tentative conclusions which seem most plausible to me.¹

¹ ?Total Running Time: 33:40 (Copyright © 2019 William Lane Craig)