

Robert Vannoy, Old Testament History, Lecture 5

Genesis 1 and God, Genesis 1:1-2

c. God is Omnipotent Creator of the Universe

I believe I had just mentioned two things in that regard. First God's existence is assumed. Second monotheism is presupposed and in that sense it was taught. And then we had some discussion on the plural form of the noun for God (Elohim, the "im" ending is the plural ending in Hebrew) but that certainly is not an indication to polytheism and probably not even a plurality in the deity but rather a plural of majesty.

Let's go on to c. God is the omnipotent creator of the universe. That certainly is clearly brought out in Genesis chapter one. God is the omnipotent creator of the universe. You have through that chapter the repeated expression "and God said, and God said, and God said." He speaks in connection with a number creative acts. So God is the omnipotent creator of the universe. Hebrew 11:3 says "the universe was formed at God's command." Certainly that is reflected in the teaching of Genesis 1 as well.

d. God is Separate from His Creation

Alright d. God is separate from his creation. There's no hint of pantheism in the Old Testament where the deity is identified with the created order. The God of Genesis 1-3 and of the Old Testament is not a nature god. He's separate, he's distinct from his creation and that sets the biblical material apart from a lot of the contemporary mythological material of the ancient Near East. So God is separate from his creation. G. Ernst Wright in his *The God Who Acts* says on page 21. I believe this is in your bibliography. It's on page 6 about the fourth entry. G. Ernst Wright *The God Who Acts*. On page 21 he says, "Here then is an utterly different God from the gods of all natural, cultural, and philosophic religion. He is no imminent power, in nature nor in the natural process of being and becoming. The nature of his being and are revealed in his historical acts. He thus transcends nature as he transcends history and consequently he destroys the whole basis of pagan religion. No force or power in the world is more characteristic to

him than any other and it is increasingly understood today that the former identifications in early Israel of a mountain god, a fertility god, a war god from which the ethical monotheism of the prophets gradually evolved are figments of scholarly presupposition and imagination. It is impossible on any empirical grounds to understand how the God of Israel could have evolved out of polytheism. He is unique, *sui generis*, utterly different.” I think that’s a pretty good statement of the uniqueness of the deity that is described in the Old Testament and particularly even here in Genesis 1. I think those four things I’ve mentioned: his existence being assumed, monotheism presupposed, he’s the omnipotent creator of the universe and he’s separate from that creation. Those elements combine to give a unique, very high God concept that is very important for the rest of the Old Testament.

2. General Teachings about the Universe

- a. The Universe is not Self-Existent or Divine
- b. It is not Inherently Evil or Antagonistic to God and Man

Let’s go onto to 2.: “General teachings about the universe.” I will begin with three comments that I think when taken together are significant concerning the universe. a. “The universe is not self-existent or divine.” In other words, the universe is not an extension of the essence of God. So there is a distinction between God and created universe. It’s not self-existent and it’s not divine. b. “It is not inherently evil or antagonistic to God and man.” And, of course, you find that in the repeated phrase also in Genesis after the specific creative acts where you read, “and God saw that it was good, it was good, it was good, it was good.” So the essential character of the created order is good. There are many philosophies and religions that hold that matter is basically evil and they hold in that antithesis between matter and spirit that matter is evil. That’s not a concept of the Bible. Of course, the creation becomes affected by the fall, but it is not inherently evil. The created order is pleasing and good.

- c. The Universe Came into Being at the Will of the Divine Creator
- d. Its Formation Follows Orderly Stages

c., “The universe came into being at the will of the divine creator.” For it is not self-existent or divine but it comes into being at the will of the divine creator. God calls it forth, he speaks these creative words and it comes into being. And d. “Its formation follows orderly stages.” We find that described throughout chapter 1 in the six days of creative activity. Its formation followed orderly stages. So I think that’s sort of a summarization of general teaching about the universe. We are going to look at more specifics of Genesis 1 but that’s certainly some of the general teaching.

3. Genesis 1-2’s General Teaching about Man

- a. The Same as with the Universe, Man is Not Self-Existent or Divine
- b. Man Owes His Existence to a Creative Act of God
- c. Man Comes as the Culmination of the Creative Acts of God
- d. Man is Separate from all the Rest of God’s Creation

Thirdly, Genesis 1-2’s general teaching about man. First, the same as with the universe, man is not self-existent or divine. Man is a creature that is created by God at a particular time in history and he’s separate from God. b. Man owes his existence to a creative act of God. Of course, we will discuss this later in relation to evolutionary theory to Genesis 1 and 2. I don’t think you can accommodate Genesis 1 and 2 to an evolutionary view of origin in any way. c. Man comes as the culmination of the creative acts of God. Genesis 1 runs to a climax and it is on the sixth day at the end of other creative activities that God creates man and woman. So man comes as the culmination of the creative acts of God. d. Man is separate from all the rest of God’s creation because he was made in the image and likeness of God. Yet, at a certain point man shares characteristics with the rest of the creation by being a creature who is part of God’s creation. But he’s also distinct in that he possesses something that no other creature does, and that is the image of God. We find out in Genesis 1:26-27. “God said, ‘let us make man in our image after our likeness.’” and 1:27 points out, “God created man in his own

image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.” I think you will get a long discussion of what the image of God in man is, what does that constitute, but I don’t want to do that at this point. I think we could say that man is a spiritual, rational and moral being and that distinguishes man from the animals--he is made in the image of God.

e. Man has Divine Authority or Dominion over the Animal Creation and Is Given the Tasks of Subduing the Earth

e., “Man has divine authority or dominion over the animal creation and is given the task of subduing the earth.” That’s in Genesis 1:28, “God blessed them, and said unto them, be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth; subdue it. And have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the fowl of the air, over every living thing that moves upon the earth.” So I think those teachings together sort of summarize what we find in Genesis 1 concerning mankind. He’s not self-existent or divine, he’s one who owes his existence to a creative act of God, he comes as the culmination of the creative acts of God, he’s separate from the rest of God’s creation because of the image, and he has authority for dominion over the animals and to subdue the earth.

4. Interpretations of Genesis 1:1

Ok, let’s go on to 4. “Interpretations of Genesis 1:1.” I’ve already mentioned Genesis 1:1 is a majestic statement, with no parallel in the extra-biblical literature of the time. “In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.” Now I’ve read from the King James, the NIV is the same, except “heavens” is plural. “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” If you look at the ancient versions, the ancient translation of Hebrew to the New Testament you get a similar rendering. What I mean by that is you find a rendering that makes Genesis 1:1 as an independent clause--a sentence with a period. Today, you look at a lot of commentaries and some translations, you will find that instead of an independent clause, it’s a subordinate clause. If you take the RSV, for example, it translates it, “in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” as

the King James does, but it has a footnote. The footnote reads: “when God began to create the heaven and the earth, the earth was without form” etc. ... it makes it a subordinate clause to what follows. The New English Bible doesn’t have any footnote. It just translates the phrase, “In the beginning of creation, when God made heaven and earth, the earth was without form and void.” This again subordinates verse one to verse two. So there’s a lot of discussion, particularly in the commentaries. Is Genesis 1:1 to be taken as an independent clause--as a statement? Or, is it to be taken as a subordinate clause to what follows? Which is the best translation? I would say, grammatically, you could make a case for either. In other words, there’s certain grammatical ambiguities, so you could argue it back and forth.

a. Genesis 1:1 Taken as an Independent Clause

So let’s discuss this a bit further under 4. I’ll give you a couple sub-points that are not on your outline sheet. a. is: “Genesis 1:1 taken as an independent clause.” I think this is the best way to understand it. That still doesn’t answer certain questions, that is, how do you interpret the significance of the statement as an independent clause? What’s its function? And I think there are at least three possible interpretations as an independent clause. The first one would be, it’s a summary of the entire chapter. “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth,” is a summary of the entire chapter. In other words, it’d be much like a newspaper headline or a lead sentence in an essay. It sort of summarizes everything to follow. Now, there’s a lot to be said for that interpretation. In fact I just went into the NIV Study Bible, and the note on Genesis 1:1 says: “a summary statement introducing the 6 days of the creative activity.” That’s the interpretation that the NIV takes it. The problem with that view is--and all these views have certain problems, that’s why there are different views--that verse 2 does not seem like a suitable beginning of the story of creation. If verse 1 is just the headline, verse 2 doesn’t seem like a suitable beginning of the story of creation but rather it tells the state of unordered created matter. “The earth was without form or void, darkness was upon the face of the deep.” It would seem a bit strange to begin the creation account with “the earth was

formless and empty.” But, I’m not saying you cannot take 1:1 as an independent clause. It seems to me though that if you do take it as an independent clause, it would be best to understand it as creation *ex nihilo*, I’ll use this term because it will come up later. It’s a Latin phrase that is often used, “from nothing,” “creation out of nothing.” Creation *ex nihilo*, is creation from nothing. This view understands, “in the beginning, God created heaven and earth,” as a reference to the *ex nihilo* creation of the ordered cosmos. Not a reference to unstructured matter that is mentioned in verse 2. And if that’s the case, then, the creation account really begins in verse 3: “And God said let there be light...” and so forth. Verse 2 would give the situation of the world before God began to speak, and then to remove any idea of pre-existent matter you would say verse 1 is prefaced. It speaks of the whole thing in the sense of creation *ex nihilo*. Now, that’s sort of moving back from verse 3 to verse 1, but I think we could make a pretty good case for that. If this is the case, then you would understand verse 1 to be a summary of the entire chapter in a sense of creation *ex nihilo* and creation from nothing, and the “heavens and the earth” would refer to the structured, ordered cosmos.

Genesis 1:2 “was” or “Became”

The second way that this has been taken, is to understand Genesis 1:1 to refer to an original creation, “in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth,” an original creation that was one of beauty and order, but one which was distinct and far-removed in time from verse 2. Now, what that assumes is, “in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth,” here was a beautiful perfect creation but then something intervened. There was a cataclysmic change. In verse 2, you read the earth, as King James says “was,” you translate that the earth “*became* without form and void and darkness was upon the face of the deep.” So that view assumes the cataclysmic change between verse 1 and verse 2. And usually that’s connected with the fall of Satan that caused such a change to happen. There was an angel that rebelled and fell from his original position, affected the universe, and brought about disorder. The conditions of verse 2, in this view, would not be how God originally created things, but they are the results of this cataclysmic change.

Now advocates of this view appeal to the verb in verse 2 which is translated “was” in the King James. It’s also translated “was” in the NIV, although, there is a note which says: “possibly became.” It’s a very familiar thing if you are taking Hebrew that the verb, “*hayah*,” can be translated either: “to be” or “to become.” Now that verbal form *hayah*--to be or to become--is used in a number of senses. Sometimes it means “to come to pass.” Sometimes it means “to come into being.” Sometimes it just means “to be in existence.” So, I think what you can see from the word itself, it’s sometimes used in a dynamic sense “to become,” sometimes in a static sense of just “to be.” It depends on context which of those is to be preferred. I don’t think you can base an argument on the word itself to prove one view or the other. Some will try to do that. Some will try to say *hayah* is always this dynamic sort of idea, thus must be translated “became.” They try to use that to support the idea of a cataclysmic change between verse 1 and verse 2. I don’t think usage will bear that out. I don’t think you can base your argument on the meaning of the verb because it goes both ways. And I would say, in relation to this view, that it is grammatically possible, though *hayah* can be used in the sense of “become”, but I don’t think there’s a great deal of evidence for this view. And the result of it is that the rest of the chapter really is not a creation account then. In a true sense of the word it becomes a rehabilitation of the earth as a dwelling place for man and animals after you see the deterioration of an original perfect and beautiful creation.

Gap Theory Debunked – Weston Fields

On your outline sheet, under “III. A. 4.” on your bibliography sheet, right in the middle of the page, you see an entry by Weston W. Fields: *Unformed and Unfilled*. That is a book-length discussion of Genesis 1:1 and 1:2. Weston Fields argues very strongly against this cataclysmic theory of a gap between 1:1 and 1:2. So if you’re interested in reading a fuller discussion of what God spoke you can look at Field’s book on the gap theory.

Now, let me just make a comment here on the gap theory. You get into the question that we touched on in a previous outline, when we were discussing these

genealogies: where do you put geologic time? There are really only three places you can put it. I'll work backwards. You can put it in the flood, we talked about that, flood geology, all the strata put in the earth in geologic time and then you'd be putting it in Genesis 6-9. You can put it in the days of Genesis 1 if you understand "day" to be a period of time rather than a 24 hour solar day. That's another alternative. We'll discuss that later when we get to it. Or you can put it between Genesis 1:1 and 1:2. There are the three places in which you can do it. There are a lot of people that, in order to solve the problem of geologic time, some prefer this view because then they can put that material between Genesis 1:1 and 1:2.

There have been various other passages in the Old Testament that have been cited as supporting this connection with the fall of Satan. I think the problem is, and we could spend a lot of time discussing each of these passages, the problem is each of these passages that are alluded to -- there's some in Isaiah, there's some in Ezekiel and there's some in Jeremiah -- each of these have interpretive problems of their own. With most of them, there's very real question if they are even talking about Satan or whether they're talking about the king of Tyre in Ezekiel 28 or the king of the king of Babylon in Isaiah 14.

2. There's no Real Link Established with Genesis 1:2 Even if Those Passages are Talking about Satan

Number 2. "there's no real link established with Genesis 1:2 even if those passages are talking about Satan. So you make a number of inferences in order to connect those passages into this in order to establish this position. So I don't think it has the firmest evidence.

3. It Refers to the Creation of Matter

Let's go onto to number 3. The third possibility is that the statement refers to the creation of matter. "In the beginning the God created the heavens and the earth." The

heavens and the earth there are the building blocks of the universe you might say--matter, in its raw stages. G.C.H. Aalders takes this view. Aalders was a Dutch Old Testament scholar who wrote a number of commentaries and other articles. He wrote a two volume commentary on Genesis recently translated into English and published by Zondervan in The Bible Student Commentary series. I don't know if you have seen that. It's been coming out for the past 4 or 5 years. The Old Testament commentary was published in Dutch. Aalders didn't write all the commentaries but he did do Genesis and in volume one of that commentary on Genesis by Aalders, page 52, says on verse one, "It's not just a heading," he rejects the first view. "It is likewise true beyond doubt that the heavens and the earth do not here refer to the present organized universe as it appeared after the Genesis work described when Genesis 1 was completed. How the universe became what it is today is described in detail in verses 3-31, the heavens and the earth in verse 1 are thus a designation of the essence of the world before the detailed forming and ordering, which is described in the rest of the chapter. We can conclude then that heavens and earth in verse 1 refers to the substance of the universe. We can also say Genesis 1:1 describes the substance from which the entire universe was formed." You see with that view it flows quite naturally into verse 2. If you understand "heaven and the earth," to be a sort of figurative designation for the substance, the building block of the elements of the universe. You see that closing in verse 2 when the earth is without form and void, unstructured, and unordered. And then it begins to be structured as stuff starts to occur. So that is also a possibility, the problem with it is that you have to take "heaven and earth" then in a somewhat figurative sense and you wonder, "should that be done?" But it does give continuity with verse 2. So I think it merits serious consideration. To me either the first view, the heading view or this third view is the most likely. What does that "earth" in verse 2 represent? It seems to represent some kind of unstructured situation of existence before God began to order things as described in the rest of chapter 1.

b. Genesis 1:1 as an Subordinate Clause –2 Views

Alright b. under 4, was, "Taking Genesis 1:1 as an independent clause." I gave

you 3 interpretations of the phrase as an independent clause. b. is to take Genesis 1:1 as a subordinate clause. Now as a subordinate clause there are basically 2 views. One would make the verse subordinate to verse 2 and the other would make it subordinate to verse 3, with verse 2 sort of a parenthesis.

The first view is that verse 1 is subordinate to verse 2. Now the whole reason for this discussion centers around the first word in the Hebrew text which is *bereshit* “In the beginning.” Those of you who haven't had Hebrew or even if you have, I'm not going to dwell on the Hebrew but just to say that the question is whether that first word is to be understood as being in the absolute or the construct state. The grammarians argue about that and I don't want to get into the technical part of that. But I think there are two considerations that strongly favor understanding that is an absolute. If you understand it as an absolute then you will take it as an independent clause, “In the beginning God created.” If you take it as a construct then you're going to take it as a subordinate clause. Now, those of you who have had Hebrew know something about absolute and construct states. If you haven't had Hebrew take it down, when you do have it, it will make some sense to you. If you don't ever take it, you can just pay attention to what follows from this discussion.

There are two things that strongly favor the absolute. First is that the Masoretic texts accents, accent the word with a disjunctive accent. That is a strong indication that the Masoretes understood it as absolute. Of course the Masoretes were later around 1000 A.D. and they accented with a disjunctive accent that indicates that they understood it as an absolute. Secondly, with no exception, the ancient versions take it as an absolute, when they translated it. In other words, the Septuagint Greek translations of the Old Testament, Syriac, and all the ancient versions understand it, without exception as an absolute. That doesn't mean that it couldn't be a construct, there's some ambiguity there-- it could be. But it seems that the weight of evidence favors the absolute.

Genesis 1:2 as a Parenthesis(?)

Now those that take it as a construct and translate it something like: “When God

began to create the heavens and the earth,” most of them would subordinate it to verse 2: “When God began to create the heavens and the earth, was in darkness was upon the face of the deep.” Some however, would say that verse 2 is a parenthesis and verse 1 should read: “and when God began to create the heaven and the earth (the earth was now darkness and void”) then God said...” You see, when God began to create...then God said. Verse 3 is a continuation to the statement from verse 1, with verse 2 as a parenthesis. That makes it rather awkward and complicated. We’ll pick that up in the next hour.

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