



Issues, Etc.TM
Christ-Centered Cross-Focused Talk Radio

TRANSCRIPT

Rev. Todd Wilken, Host

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"Creation, Part 6: Literalism and the Creation Account"

Guest:

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Conference Speaker at "The Heavens Declare: What Astronomy Can Tell Us About Biblical Creation," July 8-10, 2013, Concordia University Wisconsin

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WILKEN: Welcome back to *Issues, Etc.* I'm Todd Wilken.

When you sit down to read anything, the newspaper, a magazine, something online, anything that's written out before you, it is very important that you usually understand the context, usually understand this from how we found what it is we're reading – what it is we are reading. I am a big fan of nonfiction. I don't spend a lot of time reading fiction; it doesn't hold a lot of interest for me. It did in the past, but nowadays I do a lot of reading, and when I do it, my casual reading

isn't theology. It's generally history. That's what a lot of nonfiction is. So I know what I'm dealing with, right? The characters I'm reading about are real. They actually exist or existed. The events I'm reading about, to the best of everybody's knowledge, are established. They actually occurred. I'm not reading a story in the sense that it's a story someone made up; I'm reading a story that actually happened. It's history; it's nonfiction.

What about the Bible? What about the first chapter of the Bible? What kind of literature

is it? Many people say, “Well, you know, it’s poetry.” If it’s poetry, that means it isn’t intended to be taken literally. It’s a legend – it’s not intended to be taken literally. Is that true? Can it be something like poetry and still be intended to be taken as genuine history, a genuine narrative of the accounts of God’s creation of the world?

Joining us for part 6 of our 7-part series on creation today to talk about literalism and the creation account, Dr. Joel Heck. He’s Professor of Theology at Concordia University Texas, author of the book *In the Beginning, God*, and he’s going to be one of the speakers at a conference July 8-10 at Concordia University Wisconsin titled “The Heavens Declare: What Astronomy Can Tell Us About Biblical Creation.”

Dr. Heck, welcome back.

HECK: Thank you very much, Todd. Good to be back once more.

WILKEN: You say that it is very important when we approach the first chapter of the Bible, the creation account in Genesis chapter 1, that we know what kind of literature it is, what it presents itself to be. Why is that so important?

HECK: Well, if you take something as history, you’re going to read it one way. If you take something as myth or saga, you’re going to take it another way. You’re going to understand that the literature that you’re reading, if it’s saga or myth, is not something that actually happened in history. And so you have a lot more leeway in how you understand that passage. So there are all kinds of literary styles in both Old and New Testament, and most of the time – the vast majority of time, in fact – we can tell what type of literature it is. And it’s only in a few places where we actually have some controversy over whether something is history or myth or poetry, and if poetry, how literally we really ought to take it.

WILKEN: All right, then. We’re going to be tossing around a few similar terms. We’ve already used one of them: literature. But there are related terms that we’re going to be using, and I’d like you to explain what it is they mean. It’s often pejorative. It’s often used against people who take the Biblical account of creation at face value; that they’re being literalist. What is that word intended to mean, and why is it used almost exclusively against those who believe in creation?

HECK: Yes, to be called a “literalist” is to be insulted these days, and in a certain sense, when we hear that term, we sort of recoil; we pull back. We don’t want to be called a literalist. That’s the kind of person who takes Jesus’ words, “If your eye offends you, pluck it out, because it’s better to go into heaven with one eye missing than to be cast into hell.” And we don’t want to be seen as somebody who takes a passage like that literally. So we tend to recoil. But the reality is that “literal” is another term for taking a passage in its intended meaning. You used the word “face value.” I would use other synonyms, such as the word, “natural meaning,” or the straightforward meaning, the normal meaning, or the obvious meaning. And, in fact, I would contend that the vast majority, probably well above 90% of all the communication we give and receive in a given day is straightforward, literal communication. That’s just the norm, or the default, in all sorts of human communication. And so it should be the first assumption when we approach any text of Scripture.

WILKEN: So we’ve gotta have these two things together. To use an example of the parables that Jesus tells in the New Testament, He tells them as – they are fictional stories. They communicate a truth, but they’re fictional stories – at least, we believe most of them to be. But are you saying a person can read a parable literally and still understand that it’s not something

that is intended to communicate real events that occurred, but something else?

HECK: Oh, yes, absolutely. And in fact, in the case of parables, in most instances, we're told at the start that this is a parable. And a good translation of a parable is a comparison. The kingdom of God is *like* a mustard seed, or *like* a pearl of great price. And so the author of that parable is using that story to teach an important truth about the kingdom of God, or something else. And we're told upfront that the author is giving us a story, a comparison, and not necessarily to be taking it literally.

WILKEN: So although the term is used as a pejorative, that you talked about before, is literalism a bad word?

HECK: I would contend that it's not. I think that literalism is the norm, so therefore it can't be a bad term. And it's really only used in particular contexts. It's usually used in two places in particular. One is at the beginning of time, and the other one is at the end of time. When we're dealing with the creation account, or when we're dealing with eschatology and some of the apocalyptic literature, both Old and New Testament, particularly Daniel and Revelation. It's when you take something literally that was intended figuratively, or figuratively that was intended literally that you get into trouble. And I think a lot of our Protestant friends get in trouble when they take things in the book of Revelation literally that were intended to be figures. And the rest of society gets in trouble when they take something figuratively, or non-literally, that was intended to be taken literally, as in the opening chapter of the Bible.

WILKEN: You say, and just to kind of explain yourself, you say everyone's a literalist. What do you mean?

HECK: Oh, yes. Everyone is a literalist. Well, I suggested that earlier. That's the default; that's the way we normally

communicate in conversation after conversation. In fact, I would invite the listeners to think about this: that probably every conversation that we had with any other person during the course of this day was a conversation that took place on a literal level. The words that were spoken were intended literally, the words that were received were intended literally, and it's only when you get on a stage to act or you are writing a story for a child, or another setting of that sort where you end up not communicating literally. So again, it's the norm, it's the vast majority of all communication – not only conversationally, but pick up a newspaper, pick up a magazine, start reading a book. In fact, before you buy the book...you talked about enjoying fiction. I enjoy fiction – I love the *Chronicles of Narnia*, and *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit* by J.R.R. Tolkien, and everybody knows, picking up those books, that they are fictional books. They're not intended to be giving straightforward history. And, in fact, I think that most of the time, we know instinctively when we're reading something or hearing something, whether this is intended to be taken literally or not.

WILKEN: Now, to the issue of genre, to the issue of what kind of literature presents itself for us, we've mentioned several of those, poetry and parable. Let's just stick with parable for a second, because there are those who will say, sometimes with very little justification, "Well, look. Genesis chapter 1, the traditional Genesis creation account, it's a parable." Is there any indication whatsoever, as a genre of literature, that Genesis chapter 1 is a parable of something?

HECK: In no place in all of Scripture is there such an indication. Normally, when Jesus tells a parable, He says, "This is a parable." That's the introduction to it. We have no introduction there in the text of Scripture. So you'd have to argue on the basis of silence, but then if you read the rest of the Old

Testament, and read throughout the New Testament for any kind of hint somewhere in the rest of Biblical literature that Genesis 1 is to be intended as anything other than straightforward history, you won't find it. And in fact, we talked in an earlier week about more than a hundred passages in the New Testament that refer back to the creation account in Genesis 1 and 2. In every single instance, the New Testament writer takes the creation account in a literal, straightforward, historical sense.

WILKEN: Is there a problem also with that contention that, not only does it not in any real textual way present itself as a parable, but there's kind of a problem with making God the subject of a parable. Jesus' parables always depict God as a father, or master, or vineyard owner, or something like that. He never says, "God had a son." But Genesis chapter 1 says, "In the beginning, God." Your thoughts there, with about a minute.

HECK: Yeah. I'm not sure exactly where you're going with that question, so maybe you could rephrase that for me?

WILKEN: Well, it's not as though it says, "There was a man who decided to create something."

HECK: Oh, I see.

WILKEN: Or, "There was a man who planted a garden called Eden." It says God did it.

HECK: Or "once upon a time," the way that a lot of fairy tales start in the English language these days. Yeah, there are none of the markers. In fact, if you read Genesis 1 carefully, there are dozens of time markers that suggest that this is something that actually happened in time, and those seem to be clues to the text. Internally within the text, and the orderly sequence of events from day 1 through day 6 of creation, then moving on to the day of rest. And all

the references back to that opening chapter, including Exodus 20:11 and Exodus 31:17, that refer to the creation week as a literal week.

WILKEN: We'll take a break. Dr. Joel Heck is our guest. When we come back, what about Genesis 1 as poetry? Stay tuned.

[BREAK]

WILKEN: Dr. Heck, before the break we talked about the fact that there's really no evidence in the text whatsoever in Genesis 1 that we're dealing with a parable or a legend or an extended metaphor or a figure of speech. What about Genesis 1 as poetry in its genre?

HECK: Yes, I think it's been well established by Dr. Steven Boyd from Southern California, an Old Testament scholar, who took 100 different texts in the Old Testament to compare the narrative texts with the poetic texts. There are about 500 texts, different passages in the Old Testament, roughly 300 of them are narrative – that is, straightforward history – and about 200 of them are poetic. And he took about half and half – actually took 97 texts, randomly sampled from the Old Testament. 48 of them are narrative, and 49 of them are poetic. And he also studied the Hebrew verb in the Old Testament and in those passages, and he discovered that narrative passages of the Old Testament have a high percentage of preterites – basically past tense of the Hebrew verb that can show up in different forms. I won't get into the technicalities of that for the listening audience. And the poetry has a low percentage of preterites. Then he went back to all of those texts, and he took a careful look at them and found that the narrative sections that he had sampled fit into that pattern. The poetic sections fit into that pattern – low percentage of preterites; present or future tense instead of past. And then he took a look at the first chapter of Genesis to compare and to see, "Okay,

does the first chapter of Genesis, looking at the linguistic forms of the Hebrew verb, does the first chapter of Genesis fit in well with either the narrative or the poetic distribution of verbs throughout the rest of the Old Testament as well?" And he plotted this on a graph that is known as a logistic regression curve. I don't understand that very well, although I do understand the basic conclusions that he came up with. A mathematician in the listening audience can probably understand it a little bit better. But it was able to help him determine the likelihood that Genesis is prose or poetry, narrative or poetry. And the conclusion was that the first chapter of Genesis has a high percentage of preterites, or past tenses of the Hebrew verb, and that consequently the likelihood that Genesis 1 is narrative, that is, history rather than poetry, is about 99.99%. In other words, it's statistically indefensible to call the first chapter of Genesis poetry. But I think you and I both know, and probably most people of the listening audience know that the reason why Genesis is sometimes described as poetry is because people think that by calling the first chapter of Genesis poetic, that therefore we don't really have to take those 31 verses in a normal, natural, straightforward sense as actually giving us an account of events that literally happened the way that they are described. And the reality is that even calling something poetic doesn't enable one to escape from the literal nature of Genesis 1. And I'd like to suggest that anybody in the listening audience open up the book of Psalms: 100% poetry by virtually every estimation. Take any one verse out of the Psalms. They could take the most familiar psalm of all, Psalm 23, and read the first verse. If you're reading in the NIV, it has 11 words in it: "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in want." And I would argue – and I think this is pretty obvious – that 10 of the 11 words are intended to be understood literally. It's only the word "shepherd" that has a figurative feature to it, and may be taken figuratively. So actually, we have a lot

of poetry that is, for the most part, literal. And in those cases where it's not literal, we know almost instinctively, almost by nature, what's intended by the author. So we don't really have to have somebody with massive training in Biblical theology and the Biblical languages and methods of interpretation to be able to tell us that this particular passage really doesn't appear to say what it seems to say – doesn't really say what it appears to say.

WILKEN: So it sounds like you're saying even if – and statistically, it's practically impossible; less than 1% of probability that it would be considered in the genre of poetry – even if Genesis 1 were poetry, that would not necessarily mean that it is not communicating real events in real terms.

HECK: Yes, exactly right. And I think we know of passages, even passages that deal with creation, that come from poetic literature. For instance, Job 38:7 says that at the creation, the morning stars sang together. I don't take the idea of stars singing literally, and I don't think anyone else does. So we know almost instinctively when a passage is to be understood literally and when it's not to be understood literally. When a passage describes some feature of creation in what we call anthropomorphic terms – words that make it seem as though the author is describing them in human terms even though it's not human, like the stars singing – we know that stars don't literally sing. But in one sense, we also know that the heavens declare the glory of God and the firmament shows his handiwork. So there is a figurative sense in which the heavens declare the glory of God, or the morning stars sang together at the time of creation.

WILKEN: So let's just deal with one other thing here, about the first chapter of Genesis. And that is, while it can be demonstrated – and you just mentioned there how – that it doesn't fit rightly in the genre of poetry. It is a formulaic, a rather

repetitive retelling of things. But that seems to be more due to the fact that it's giving us very, very basic information on what God did over six successive – actually, seven successive days.

HECK: It is formulaic; there are some refrains, “And God saw everything He had made and behold, it was good.” At the end of the chapter He says it was very good. About six times in the chapter it says, “God saw that it was good.” I guess one of the questions I would like to ask the person that takes this chapter figuratively is, how could this chapter have been written in such a way that made it plain to them that it was to be understood literally? Because there are so many aspects of this chapter, including the references to time that I mentioned earlier, and many detailed parts of this can really only be understood literally. Typically, when people look at specific parts of the chapter, they take them literally. For instance, when it said God blessed them and said, “Be fruitful and increase in number,” we take that literally. When God made the wild animals according to their kinds, we take that literally. When He said that the water under the sky be gathered to one place, we take that literally. So if we were to look at individual phrases or sentences or verses within the chapter, everybody seems to understand those literally. But then there is one thing, and one thing in particular, that seems to be taken figuratively, and that's the word “day,” the Hebrew word “day.” And that's about the only place where people part company with those of us that take the entire chapter literally. They seem to take everything else in the chapter literally except that one word, that one time word, which is defined by the phrase, “and it was evening and morning, the first day, the second day, the third day, and so on.”

WILKEN: Then with only thirty seconds here, basically, as a rule of thumb, how should we approach literature to decide whether it is to be understood literally or not? About thirty seconds here, Dr. Heck.

HECK: Well, we need to look at the context. I think our default needs to be to take it in a straightforward, literal, historical sense. But we also need to look for clues in the context, especially the words leading up to it. Some clues on the part of the speaker are an indication in the text that the passage is not to be taken literally, or even some very obvious figure of speech, such as when Jesus referred to Herod as a fox. I think we know that He did not mean a little red, bushy-tailed animal.

WILKEN: Dr. Joel Heck is Professor of Theology at Concordia University Texas, author of the book *In the Beginning, God*. He'll be one of the speakers at a conference July 8-10 at Concordia University Wisconsin titled “The Heavens Declare: What Astronomy Can Tell Us About Biblical Creation.”

Dr. Heck, thank you very much.

HECK: It has been my pleasure.

WILKEN: It's about an honest reading, isn't it, about what's laying before you. It's not just about “how does God intend us to read.” That's very important. God wouldn't leave us in the dark here. And those who contend that these things are parables, or myths, or poetry that is not intended literally, really are contending that from the very first word in the Bible, God is being ambiguous. And that doesn't seem to fit with the clear message that God wants to communicate about Jesus Christ to all men in those Scriptures. I'm Todd Wilken. I'll talk with you tomorrow. Thanks for listening to *Issues, Etc.*

