

The Biblical Plan, Announcement of the Great Commission

Lesson 3: Wednesday, October 25, 2005

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In the previous two lessons we mentioned seven different mysteries, 1-Matter, 2-Life, 3-The Cambrian Explosion and the First Appearance of Predation, 4-Humans, 5-The New Beginning of Eden and the Fall of Adam, 6-the consequent declining of ancient high civilizations, and 7-The Abrahamic New Beginning. But we hardly touched on the latter three mysteries.

Introduction

In this lesson we begin to move into the period addressed by the Bible. We now leave the first four mysteries behind, since, presumably, they occurred prior to Genesis 1:1. Thus, we pass over the possibility that the previous 500 million years of repeated asteroidal collisions were earlier examples of new beginnings. We focus now on the aftermath of what could have been the most recent asteroidal collision in the region of the Middle East. That is, we begin in more detail with the last three mysteries, number five, the New Beginning of Genesis and the Fall of Adam, number six the decline and degeneration following Adam's Fall, and seven, the specific new beginning of the Biblical story from Genesis 12 to the present. Thus, to repeat, we will deal with the following elements in the story:

- We begin and assume the pre-biblical distortion of all creation,
- The Fifth Mystery, the Edenic new beginning in a region of recent devastation, ending with the Fall of Adam,
- The Sixth Mystery, the aftermath of Adam's Fall - the decline of everything.
- The temporary Noaic new beginning
- The Seventh Mystery, the Abrahamic new beginning which extends to the present, that is, what was (and still is) the little understood plan of redemption and restoration, what Paul was forced to call a mystery. This is the Seventh (and final) Mystery. It will take all of the rest of this and subsequent lessons to describe the unfolding of the Abrahamic plan.

Mystery 5

As mentioned, the Edenic New Beginning in Genesis 1:1 was quite possibly built - according to my suppositions - upon a vast, regional devastation very likely in the realm of the

Fertile Crescent.

In other words, the early events as recorded in Genesis Chapter 1 do not appear to record the events of an original creation either of the earth or of life but describes the sequence following a major asteroidal collision and the new and sinless re-creation of both animal and human life - characterized by clearly non-carnivorous behavior.

Genesis goes on to record the seduction and deception of this new creation, the breakdown of the Edenic new beginning, the inevitable exposure to disease and the gradual reversion to shorter life spans, the reversion to carnivorous behavior, and the looming, essentially hopeless destruction of war and pestilence.

Mystery 6

We also notice the decline of the ancient "archaic" civilizations, whose sophistication was evidently superior to what came later. This is Mystery 6. Note that it is the very opposite of ideas of social evolution.

We can take note of the decline of the Sumerian civilization from which Abraham came - in his day it had been in decline for 800 years. We see a similar decline in the Egyptian civilization - the great pyramids being the work of the early period of Egyptian history. We note the more sophisticated earlier civilization behind the Incas in Peru. We see the same thing behind the Maya in Mexico and Central America and we note the early civilization that produced the Stonehenge observatory - a project which could not be fully understood by later generations.

Mystery 7

In terms of God's strategy we see selectivity as He selects Noah for survival in his part of the world, whose offspring inhabit the whole Middle East. Later, God selects Abraham to be the carrier of faith and blessing to the rest of the world.

We read of Isaac being selected instead of Ishmael, and Jacob instead of Esau. We see Moses being selected and then Joshua. We see the Southern Kingdom emerging instead of "all Israel." We see the small remnant returning from Babylon, two thirds remain-

ing in Babylon - by Jesus' day only one third had returned to the land of their fathers. We see selectivity, of course, in the case of Galilee-of-the-Gentiles rather than Jerusalem, Nazareth, of all places, and the selection of Mary.

Such *selectivity* has often been interpreted as *exclusivity*. Thus, we are surprised when Abraham is judged immoral by Abimelech, a man who was completely outside of the Abrahamic Covenant. It would seem that the Bible reports accurately and critically on a nation and its story, a story which is not altogether admirable. For example, much of the Bible describes almost exaggeratedly-objectionable behavior. Thus, the British historian, Herbert Butterfield, remarked that the uniqueness of the story of the Jewish people is not their history but their historiography. Apparently *selection* has had as much or more to do with the goal of *reporting to posterity* and other nations as it has been a matter of gaining exclusive favors.

Furthermore, the Bible obviously does not contain all the things God has said and done among all of the nations of the world. We don't always remember that fact. It is common for Christians to assume that God's selectivity has really been intended to be exclusivity: that God spoke to and through the Jewish tradition and to and through none other. Thus, again, echoing Butterfield, we can, in the case of the Jewish people, and their Bible, understand that it is the *perspective of the record* not the *content of the record* that is the most unique.

In other words, the amazing and unique *literary* record we have in the Bible, despite its admirable honesty and self-criticism, does not on merely talk about human *events* that were unique or universal. With surprising accuracy it does describe people and their experiences and their understanding of things in the situation in which they found themselves, and in this we find many unique perspectives.

The Bible - What Kind of a Book?

It is important to remind ourselves that there is a big difference between believing in

an inerrant Bible and in believing in inerrant interpretations of the Bible.

In regard to our interpretation of Genesis (or any part of the Bible for that matter), there are at least three possibilities:

First, that what is said was meaningful to both the human author and his hearers or readers. This is the usual situation throughout the Bible.

Second, that what was said had a double meaning: it was meaningful at the time and also described something that was going to happen in the future. This is much rarer, but we do see it, for example, in some of the references in the OT to Christ in the NT.

Thirdly, it is even more rarely possible that what was said was confusing and meaningless to the human author and audience at the time, and only described something in the future that was unknown at the time.

In the particular case of Genesis chapter 1, we can begin, as usual, by assuming that what was said was meaningful to the ancients producing it, that it did not miraculously represent insight into the entire universe, unknown at the time, and that it most likely meant something else. Is it not much more likely that we moderns have anachronistically read our current cosmological knowledge back into the text? Have we been guilty of wanting to put scientific discoveries into the text? If so, that would be quite understandable and forgivable, but it would obscure what the Bible meant at the time it was written.

Whenever we misinterpret a verse we not only risk error in our interpretation we cover up what the Bible is really saying about something else.

This sort of thinking, however, does not require us to insist that the Abrahamic Covenant has only a local meaning, since - unlike Genesis 1 - we do not in Genesis 12 have to choose between an ancient meaning of one set of events and a modern understanding to refer to a completely different set of events.

As for the detailed meaning of the Abrahamic Covenant, the idea that this is the first case of the Great Commission has been

explained in the Perspectives course. Here it may be well to look at two aspects of it more closely.

The Link to the New Testament

The commission is mentioned in regard to Abraham three times and once to each Isaac and Jacob - In Gen. 12:1-3, 18:18, 22:18, to Abraham, to Isaac in 26:4-5, and to Jacob in 28:14-15. It is interesting that Gen. 28:15 is closely similar to Matt. 28:20. This does similarity does not appear clearly in English translations since our OT is a translation of the Hebrew. But in the Bible of the early church - the Greek OT - the NT phrase, "I will be with you until the end" is almost verbatim in Genesis 28:20.

This close similarity gives rise to the thought that Jesus in Matthew 28 was consciously paraphrasing the OT Great Commission in the form that it was given to Jacob. Jacob was also called Israel, and Jesus talking specifically to the children of Israel not the children of Abraham, so that would make sense. *But, in any case, the key point here is that the Great Commission was not something invented in NT times.*

Furthermore, it is not just Jesus who alludes to these OT Great Commission passages. Peter in Acts 3 quotes the phrase "in your seed all the families of the earth will be blessed." Paul in Galatians 3 says,

Scripture, seeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the Gospel beforehand to Abraham saying, "all the nations shall be blessed in you."

While we are on this verse let's be sure to note that the faith Paul is talking about that Abraham had was not what we often glibly call "saving knowledge of Christ," if that phrase means head knowledge. In the Bible faith is indissolubly related to obedience. Indeed in Romans 1:5 Paul talks about bringing about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles. Abraham's "saving faith" did not involve any very detailed knowledge about Christ at all. And, the Gospel preached to him Paul summarizes as the simple fact that it is good news that all nations will be included. That is, the *basis* of the Gospel is the blood of Christ, the one name under heaven whereby we must be saved. But the *message* of the Gospel is indeed

the good news that Gentiles not just Israel are and always have been welcome by God.

The "Blessing"

We must also note that the common English translation "I will bless you ... and you will be a blessing to all of the families of the earth," fits in perfectly with our modern prosperity gospel. Again, we usually read into the text what we like it to mean. In this case the misleading word is the word *blessing*. This is, in the Hebrew, the same word used again and again in the book of Genesis with a different meaning. Jacob was "blessed" not Esau, for example. This did not mean simply that he was to inherit land. It meant he was to shoulder many of the heavy responsibilities of a father now too old to carry them further. It made him the principal carrier of the family name. He was now more officially rooted in the bloodstream of his father than ever before.

For us today the difference between these two meanings of the word blessing is the difference between getting a ticket to heaven, which you can walk off with, and inheriting a permanent relationship to a heavenly family with all of the rights and privileges that are involved. This long-term family relationship illuminates the rationale for Jesus saying "As my Father sent me, so send I you." As we have seen earlier, this "blessing," this new birth inducts us into a kingdom at war not just to a safe holding tank awaiting heaven. Believers in poverty, oppression, and even semi-starvation tend to sing about the next world. Even Evangelicals in years gone by, in their less up-scale days, use to sing,

This world is not my home, I'm just a-passing
through
My treasures are laid up somewhere beyond the
blue
The angels beckon me from heaven's open door
And I can't feel at home in this world anymore.
My Savior pardoned me from guilt and shame I
know
I'll trust His saving grace, while traveling here
below. [No hint of a war to fight while "here
below"]
I know He'll welcome me from heaven's open door
And I can't feel at home in this world anymore.
This type of otherworldly fixation is less
defensible the more secure we become and the

more knowledge we gain of what it takes to be loyal to a family, a kingdom, which is at war here and now, striving to set the record straight as to who God is and what He is like and to glorify His Name.

In other words Adam and his lineage became survivors but, unless reborn spiritually, not soldiers in a war against Satan. Once "saved" or "reborn" we become "listed" in heaven in "the lamb's book of life," but we may not be aware of the fact that we are also soldiers "enlisted" on earth to fight, as Paul says,

not against flesh and blood but against principalities, powers, against the rulers of darkness, against spiritual wickedness in high places.

Thus, it is not merely a matter of getting humans into heaven but getting heaven into humans. Those who are enlisted but don't report for duty are classified as "Absent With Out Leave" or "AWOL." When Jesus appears on the scene and tells us we should pray "Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven," when He assures us "the gates of Hell will not prevail against the onslaught of the church," that is, the fortifications of Hell will not be able to resist the destruction of the works of the Devil, our response may merely be "Huh? I thought the purpose of church was to meet my needs and the needs of my family." In a war of course soldiers need to eat and to sleep and have their basic needs met. But they are also committed to an enterprise in which they may be injured or killed. Now that sounds like Jesus saying "He who seeks to save himself will lose his life but he who will lose his life for my sake and the Gospel will save it." From this we realize that going AWOL is not necessarily as safe as staying with the troops and fighting the good fight.

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Key question from class:

"I feel uneasy about trying to fit science into the Bible. I would rather start with the Bible."

Answer: In many cases scientific discoveries have illuminated the Bible. In this particular case, however, we are actually trying to unburden the Genesis 1 from assumptions about what it means. In this case the scientific discoveries of old bones have already been "fitted into the Bible" and we are trying to say they don't fit.