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The Problems of Inerrancy and Historicity in Connection with Genesis 1-3

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The question of the inerrancy of the Holy Scriptures has been one of major concern in the last half-century. One of the problems with the discussion of inerrancy has been that of definition. Perhaps the best solution and the simplest would be to define *inerrant* as "not contrary to fact." Among contemporary exegetes, however, this category of "not contrary to fact" is not at all appropriate in regard to the first three chapters of Genesis. If this section of Genesis is not a report of hard-core historical fact, then the question of whether or not it is contrary to fact simply can no longer be asked. These modern exegetes would admit, to be sure, that there are some sections of the Holy Scriptures where a discussion of inerrancy, as it has been here defined, would be fitting. For example, there is a general agreement that Luke attempted to write history in the Gospel and Acts, even though there are many who would say that he was off on some of his facts. They would say he was wrong about Quirinius being governor of Syria at the time of the birth of our Lord. Yes, they might say that Luke was off on his facts, but they would, nevertheless, allow there were hard core facts behind his report. This kind of exegetical approach is not common, however, in regard to Genesis 1-3; very few contemporary exegetes would say that Genesis 1-3 is history in any sense at all.

In regard to Genesis 1-3, therefore, the discussion of inerrancy must start with the determination of the type of literature employed in these chapters. There are many types of literature, but two main categories must be discerned for our purposes. The one class would include any type of purely illustrative story, e.g., allegory, parable, legend, tale; the other would include any account that purports to tell us what really happened.

In proceeding with this inquiry we must make certain to say that mere use of figurative or symbolic language in a historical report does not of itself suggest that the account is not historical. A trite example—leaders of congregations in the New Testament are called "shepherds," i.e., pastors. This fact in no way suggests that leaders and their congregations have only a symbolical existence. In fact they have no symbolical

existence at all. They have only a real, historical, factual existence.

In approaching Genesis 1-3, there are many avenues that could be taken. This section is part of the book of Genesis as a whole, and the book is part of another larger unit, the Pentateuch. The Pentateuch, in turn, is part of the historical section of the Old Testament, a section extending from Genesis through Chronicles at least. But to argue from such a large section would involve us in presenting an entire Biblical hermeneutic. For this reason, it would be best to argue from Genesis alone. This is only a question of convenience. There are, to be sure, sections in Genesis resembling allegory. The dreams of Joseph, the son of Jacob, are illustrative stories. The cows, the stars, the sun, the moon in his dreams all have symbolical meanings, very much like Jotham's fable or parable in the Book of Judges. Therefore, the Hebrews did know of this kind of story. But this phenomenon hardly suggests or even allows that every story in Hebrew literature is an illustrative one. In fact, such accounts are rare and clearly indicated. In the case cited Joseph provides the interpretation to stories that would otherwise remain hidden. In doing so, he is recognized as being a special messenger or prophet of God. Now the question has to be asked whether Genesis 1-3 in any way resembles these symbolical stories.

Where there is an illustrative story in Genesis, as elsewhere in the Holy Scriptures, there is always a person who receives or tells the story. Then there is an interpreter. In the case of Joseph, Jotham, and Jesus, the storyteller and the interpreter are the same. But this is hardly the case in Genesis 1-3. There is no mention of any narrator, and there is no interpretation following narration. (Matthew 13 contains parables, some of which are not interpreted. Nevertheless the interpretation for the one parable is supplied. This parabolic interpretation provides the meanings for those not explicitly interpreted.) Unless there are clear signs or indications that we are dealing with an allegory or parable, all accounts are to be taken as actual descriptions of fact, i.e., that which really happened and existed. Again, let it be repeated that the presence of symbolical words do not change this fact.

It seems, moreover, to be a basic hermeneutical rule in the Holy Scriptures that God does not appear as God in an illustrative story where the terms of the illustrative story are purely secular and not religious. Thus, in pericopes where the terminology is secular, Jesus or God does not appear as such but is represented by another figure. Examples of this are the allegory of the Good Shepherd, the parable of the sower, the parable of the wedding invitation, and the parable of the

workers in the vineyard. Everything in these accounts is symbolical. The pericope of the sheep and the goats is not a parable but a description of the eschatological reality. Sheep and goats are symbolical designations for believers and unbelievers, but all the parts of the account are eschatologically real. Both groups speak to Jesus. There is no hint that we have here a case of talking goats and sheep. The parable of the Rich Fool is an illustrative story representing the death experiences of certain persons, but the terms of the illustrative story are not themselves symbolical. Such terms as "rich man," "God," and "requiring the soul" are understandable without further interpretation to the hearer who listens to it for the first time. At the end of the parable of the Rich Fool, Jesus universalizes the experience (Luke 12:21).

There is nothing to suggest that Genesis 1-3 is an illustrative story or that its main terms are symbolical. There is no suggestion that what happens in this section of Genesis repeats itself or can be repeated by or in the hearer. This is the case with some parables. Some parables are analogies of once-and-for-all time experiences. The killing of the son of the owner of the vineyard by the vineyard workers is a case in point. But behind every such analogy there is a clear and somewhat extensive historical account. In the case cited, it would be the crucifixion of Jesus and the promise of the destruction of Jerusalem. This is hardly the case with Genesis 1-3. If it is suggested that Genesis 1:3-2:25 is a parable based on the fact recorded in Genesis 1:1-2, then this would be a case where God appears as God in the record of the fact and in the parabolic interpretation. But where is such an approach used elsewhere in the Scriptures? Compare the vineyard workers who kill the son. God is not mentioned by name in that case. If Genesis 3 is an illustrative story about the fall into sin, then where is the fact that forms the basis for the alleged parable? If the fact behind the alleged parable of Genesis 3 is the sinful condition of every person, then what about the person who has no first-hand experience of sin in his life?

It will also hardly do to consider the terms in Genesis 1-3 to be symbolical as is typical with most parables. If "day" and "serpent" are symbols, then there is no reason for not considering "God" a symbolical term. "God" then would be a symbol for a great truth behind the word "God." This option has already been taken by some. Paul Tillich would say that the word "God" is the symbol for ultimate reality and that symbols can and do and should change. To focus on the symbol "God" without going behind it to the true reality, the ultimate reality, is idolatry. Schubert Ogden says that "God" is as much symbol, here defined as myth, as are the miracles

or any part of Scriptures. We are now faced with an either-or situation. Either the entire account is symbolical, including the reference to God, or the account is historical or real, not only in the section referring to God but also the section dealing with the serpent. At this point it would be easier to take a grand leap of faith and say "all or nothing." This might satisfy those who are committed to historical revelation, but will it satisfy anyone else? If we bring in faith here as judge, have we not surrendered the historical mooring for our position? The question should be answered on the basis of Genesis 1-3, if at all possible.

Genesis 1:1-2:3 contains references to things that were real or factual in the time of the ancient Hebrews and which continue to be real down to our time. "Light," "darkness," "day," "night," "sun," "moon," "stars," "seasons," "birds," "fish," "male," "female," all have real—and not symbolical existence. Paul's sermons to Gentiles (Acts) are based on the fact of creation, as is Jesus' theological explanation of marriage. In Paul's sermons he assumes that his hearers agree with him that there is a creation. He then argues back to the creator God. Paul's arguments for morality and belief in God in Romans 1-2 make this same assumption. Here we are getting into a more profound subject. But let it be said simply that theology depends on history. Paul's call to conversion and belief in God, i.e., theology, is based on a historical creation, e.g., Genesis 1:1-2:3. The creation we experience today is the same creation as that of Genesis 1. If our world is real, then so (must be) the one in Genesis 1.

The same consideration must be given Genesis 2:4-3:24. Five verses, 2:10-14, give us geographical information about Eden. But in an allegorical or other type of illustrative story this information would have no place because illustrative stories do not happen in geographical places but only in the mind of the storyteller. The author's clear intent is that we should consider this section also as being historical. Reference could also be made to the genealogies which provide the literary skeleton of the book of Genesis. Thus, the Jews in Egypt (Genesis 50 - Exodus 1) have a direct historical connection to Adam and Eve and they in turn to heaven and earth. It is impossible that genealogies should connect history and symbolical existence.

The larger problem still to be explored is that of determining the use of history and illustrative story in Hebrew literature in general. Responding to this problem would involve a comparison of the myths of Baal with the accounts of the real historical involvement of God with Israel. Elijah's sarcastic jabs at Baal's vacation seem to be a protest against the

use of myth in theology. Our immediate concern, however, is with Genesis 1-3. Using the usual literary yardsticks to distinguish history from illustrative stories, there is absolutely nothing to suggest that we are dealing with anything else than a purely historical account.