How in Hades Do We Teach Genesis 1–3?

Joshua Marshall Strahan

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I thought I was doing such a good job. There I was, teaching a college course on Genesis to a classroom of mostly evangelical students, who were hoping to go into some form of ministry. I was spreading the good news about how science and Christian faith can play friendly. I had, so I thought, been working through Genesis at an appropriately slow and pastorally sensitive pace. We had been learning about the interpretive significance of genre and how we must take seriously the text's socio-cultural location. We had been reading John Walton, and I was supplementing this with the sometimes supportive and sometimes dissenting perspectives of folks such as Tremper Longman III and Iain Provan.

Although we had plenty of class discussion along the way, it was not until I set aside an entire class hour for questions that it came out that several students were unsettled by our study of Genesis. Despite my careful nuancing throughout, two nagging fears lingered in some students' minds: (1) if Genesis 1–3 is not offering a straightforward historical description, then perhaps nothing else in scripture is historical either—including the incarnation and the death and resurrection of Jesus; and (2) if Genesis 1–3 is not teaching scientific truths about the mechanics and timeline of creation, then perhaps we should not take seriously any theological claims of Genesis 1–3, since those theological claims would be interwoven with cosmological material that we find inaccurate.

On the one hand, it is refreshing that some college students still care deeply about the authority of scripture, about learning from and submitting to the truths it proclaims. On the other hand, I was disappointed that these students had not followed my nuanced claims that, I thought, had addressed both these fears. I left the classroom discouraged that day. I deeply love scripture and regard it as authoritative, special revelation. It hurt to think that I was inadvertently undermining that conviction in my students. It also angered me that too many churches are perpetuating flat, unthoughtful approaches to scripture, which set students up for faith crises when they discover that scripture is not like what they were taught.

Fortunately, serendipity was waiting for me in my Advanced Greek course, in which we were reading the account of the Rich Man and Lazarus from Luke 16. Reading that text on that day with three students from my Genesis course led to an insightful conversation, which inspired a lecture I would give my Genesis students at our next meeting. What follows is a sketch of that lecture, which I believe helped my struggling students to fit the pieces together in a way that allowed for (1) a high view of scripture, (2) the lack of scientific claims in Genesis about the precise mechanics and timeline of creation, and (3) historical claims about events such as the death and resurrection of Jesus. The lecture below is by no means intended to replace

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the incredible work of the scholars mentioned above; it is merely a humble supplement that may help to ease the concerns of Christians who are struggling to align their theological convictions with a more nuanced reading of Genesis.[1]

From Creation to Hades and Back Again

I opened the class by reading Luke 16:19–31, instructing the students to pay attention to genre clues in this pericope.[2]

> There was a [certain] rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate lay a [certain] poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. He called out, "Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames." But Abraham said, "Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony. Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us." He said, "Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father's house—for I have five brothers—that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment." Abraham replied, "They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them." He said, "No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent." He said to him, "If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead." (NRSV)

The students nearly all agreed that this pericope was a parable. I pointed out, though, that Luke *nowhere* specifies that this is a parable. So, I asked what clued them in to this particular genre. They came up with the following—with a little help from me: the characters ("a certain rich man," "a certain poor man"), the bizarre setting (Hades, beside Abraham), the horrific situation (speaking across a chasm separating Hades and Abraham), instinct (this feels like a parable), and ancient parallels using similar motifs (an afterlife scene, messengers for the dead).[3] However, we also noted the oddness of Jesus providing Lazarus's name, since Jesus nowhere else names characters in parables. This, however, may be explained as foreshadowing, since Lazarus is the Greek name for Eliezer, meaning "my God helps."[4]

I asked next, "What truths are being taught in this parable?" They responded: one's status in this life is not guaranteed in the next; showing mercy now is important; the Law and the Prophets support Jesus's teaching; God cares for those whom others disregard.

Then, I asked, "Is this parable offering us a plain and precise depiction of the afterlife?" They nearly all agreed that this is not likely the case—that such a claim would be pushing the parable too far, a misinterpretation. This presented a nice opportunity for them to consider (and explain to me) *how the Bible can communicate truth by using a medium that borrows common motifs and/or folkloric elements*.

This left us with several important questions. First, if this parable is adapting folkloric depictions of the afterlife, does this mean that the Christian belief in the afterlife—in heaven and hell—is also a folkloric doctrine that we should set aside? Here, the students needed a little extra help. I explained that the church's convictions about the afterlife are not based solely on the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus. Rather, they ideally arise from a thoughtful reading of the larger canonical witness on the matter that takes into account the various genres of any relevant texts. Moreover, such doctrinal study should be informed by the church's historic witness, especially as found in the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds. For example, on the afterlife, the Apostles' Creed confesses: "I believe … [Jesus] will come again to judge the living and the dead … [I believe] in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting."

Second, and related, I asked, "If we read this passage of Luke as having folkloric elements, does this mean that Luke's account of the resurrection is also folkloric?" Once again, the students needed a little help. I explained how a book such as Luke has an overarching genre (ancient historiography) that includes within it certain subgenres (such as genealogies and parables). We must be careful not to interpret the subgenres according to the same exegetical rules as

the overarching genre, or vice versa. When Luke narrates Jesus's resurrection appearances, he is working within the genre of ancient historiography (and not parable), so it would be a misinterpretation to treat the resurrection scenes as folkloric. If any doubt remains, we also look to the larger canonical witness and church tradition, both of which have made it abundantly clear that the resurrection is a historical event.

I then summarized the following main ideas from this exercise:

1. Not all genres come with labels, so we have to be attentive to genre clues.
2. A genre that contains folkloric elements can nonetheless communicate authoritative truths.
3. It is unwise to treat the Bible's folkloric elements as straightforward, precise descriptions of reality.
4. A single biblical book can contain subgenres that are to be treated differently than the overarching genre.
5. Christian doctrines should arise from listening to the canonical witness while keeping an ear open to the church's historical witness, particularly the church's great creeds.

Having taken the students through this exercise in Luke, we turned to Genesis and went through the same steps. Ideally, this would help them see how the nonthreatening conclusions we drew about Luke 16 might also apply to Genesis 1–3. Once again, I began by asking what genre clues we might notice. Here are some of what we came up with: the artistic structure and style of Genesis 1 (the repeating pattern: God said … God called … evening and morning, the parallel of days 1–3 with days 4–6); the folkloric elements (a talking snake, God walking and breathing, the names of the main characters are Human and Life); the Ancient Near East (ANE) parallels (humans made from clay and the blood of a god, a snake that steals life-prolonging fruit, creation as temple construction); and the geographical and historical markers (Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, genealogies in Genesis 4–5). Along the way, I drew their attention to parallel genre clues from our Lukan parable (Table 1).

These parallels—though not exact—illustrate how such genre clues had earlier signaled us to treat Luke 16 as more figurative than literal; hence, it seemed wise to take a similar approach with Genesis 1–3.[5] In light of these parallels and the aforementioned genre clues, I suggested that Genesis 1–3 is something like an ancient, folkloric account of origins, which uses motifs and cosmology from the ancient world to teach theological truths.[6] Genesis 1–3 may indeed have some historical referents (for example, Adam, Eden, the Fall), though the precise nature of such referents cannot be determined with any certainty due to the nature of the genre.

Next, I asked what truths are being taught in Genesis 1–3. Their response: God is the sole creator (monotheism and transcendence; not polytheism or pantheism); humans have a special status and role (image bearers who are to care for creation; not the gods' slaves, who are formed in violence and tasked with menial labor); creation has an intrinsic goodness (declared "good" seven times; neither a primordial accident nor a result of violence among the gods); males and females are meant for healthy relationships (partners and image-bearers, a reality which becomes only adversarial because of sin); sin distorts the goodness and harmony that God intends (as opposed to evil and brokenness being intrinsic to the created order).

Then, reminding them of what we had learned from our exercise in Luke, and what we had learned about genre clues in Genesis 1–3, I asked, "Should we treat Genesis 1–3 as offering a straightforward, scientific, literal description of the timeline and mechanics of creation?" I think that, for the most part, they could grasp how treating Genesis 1–3 like a literal, scientific description could be a mishandling of the genre,

Table 1. Comparison of Luke 16:19–31 and Genesis 1–3

	Luke 16:19–31	Genesis 1–3
Characters That Seem Archetypal	a certain rich man, a certain poor man	Human (Adam), Life (Eve)
Extraordinary Setting	Hades, Abraham's side (likely referencing the Great Banquet)	Heavenly council, cosmic viewpoint, Paradise
Extraordinary Situation	an afterlife dialogue across an unpassable chasm	God forming the world; God forming humans; sin's entrance
Ancient Parallels	an afterlife scene, messengers to the dead	humans made from clay and the blood of a god, a snake that steals life-prolonging fruit, etc.

much like using Luke 16 to create a diagram of the afterlife. Here, I reiterated what we learned earlier: *a genre that contains folkloric elements can nonetheless communicate authoritative truth.* Just as Luke 16 communicated authoritative truths while using folkloric motifs about the afterlife, so also does Genesis 1–3 communicate authoritative truths while using folkloric motifs about ancient origins.

This led to an important clarification question. If Genesis 1–3 uses folkloric elements, does this mean that major Christian doctrines on creation, such as God is the creator and humans are made in his image, are also folkloric doctrines that we should set aside? Once again, I pointed them to the larger canonical witness as well as to the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds. The canon and Creeds bear witness to a transcendent God creating *ex nihilo* and to humans being endowed with special dignity and responsibilities. Folkloric elements in Genesis 1–3 do not threaten such doctrines. However, the diversity of canonical descriptions of God's creative act along with the Creeds' silence on the mechanics and timeline of creation all suggest that Christians are not required to hold specific views on the chronology, timeline, or technique of God's creative act.[7]

Lastly, I asked, "If we read this section of Genesis as having folkloric elements, does this mean that the Genesis narration of the patriarchs is also folkloric?" Here we returned to the distinction between a book's overarching genres and its subgenres, and how we must be careful not to interpret the subgenres according to the same exegetical rules as the overarching genre, and vice versa. When we turn to the patriarchal narratives beginning around Genesis 12, we must once again be mindful of genre clues. As I understand it, the patriarchal narratives are much less folkloric and much more historiographical (although we must be careful not to treat ancient-near-eastern historiography the same as modern historiography).

As the lecture hour came to a close, I anticipated one nagging issue that my students might have—namely, "Why didn't God just describe creation more like it actually happened instead of using folklore?" After raising this issue, I read an extended excerpt on the Big Bang from Stephen Hawking's *A Brief History of Time*.[8] After their eyes were sufficiently glazed over from mental exhaustion and bewilderment, I suggested that perhaps God thought it better to communicate truths in ways that met people where they were, rather than communicating truths in ways that were incomprehensible to the ancient audience—and to most of us, too. I think, upon realizing that they also are incapable of handling a technical, scientific description, my students saw why Genesis narrated the creation account as it did.

I then opened the floor to questions and was pleased to see that some of my more distressed students were now less bothered. At this point, our fifty minutes of class were up; if I had had time, though, I would have restated my five main points from earlier.

It is my sincere belief that it is life giving and liberating and convicting and inspiring to read Genesis in such a way that takes seriously both its authoritative status and its socio-cultural location. ⌂

Notes

[1]I am particularly grateful to my student, Elly Jack, both for her willingness to discuss her concerns with Genesis, and for the many insights she provided from her prior research on The Rich Man and Lazarus.

[2]I am borrowing the notion of "genre clues" (as well as insights about genre clues in Genesis) from Tremper Longman III, *Genesis: The Story of God Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016).

[3]On genre clues, ancient parallels, and further speculation about the precise genre of Luke 16:19–31, see Richard Bauckham, "The Rich Man and Lazarus: The Parable and the Parallels," *New Testament Studies* 37, no. 2 (1991): 225–46; Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 9:51–24:53,* Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1996).

[4]Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke,* Sacra Pagina 3 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1991), 252.

[5]This is not to ignore the aforementioned historical markers such as genealogies and geographical referents; it is, however, to suggest that geographical and genealogical references are not the sole determinative factors in discerning the genre in question. To make them the sole determinative factors might be equivalent to claiming that Luke 16:19–31 cannot be a parable because Lazarus is given a name. In fact, just as there is a plausible explanation for Lazarus being named, so there might be plausible reasons for including geographical and genealogical references in a genre that is more folkloric. This becomes even more plausible when one takes into account both the artistic shaping of the genealogies and the mysterious geographical references to the Pishon and Gihon Rivers, which have no clear corresponding locations.

[6]I tend to avoid the term "myth," given its obvious baggage; in my opinion, "folklore" seems less alarming to students.

[7]Mark Harris, *The Nature of Creation: Examining the Bible and Science* (Bristol, CT: Acumen, 2013), 79.

[8]Stephen Hawking, *The Illustrated A Brief History of Time* (1988; updated and expanded edition, New York: Bantam, 1996), 145–49.

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