

Teaching Creation: A Modular Approach

David A. Bosworth

Barry University

Abstract. *The present article describes a modular approach to teaching Genesis 1–3 that values depth over breadth even in an introductory class. The module allows students to learn about the text and its original context by orienting discussion around contemporary issues of practical concern. Specifically, the creation-evolution debates provide an opportunity for students to learn about contemporary political, social, and legal implications of interpreting Genesis 1–3. The conflict of traditional and modern values emerges also in issues surrounding gender and autonomy in Genesis 2–3. This pedagogical approach challenges various student worldviews to promote discussion and greater intellectual sophistication. The correlation of the text with ongoing contemporary issues engages student interest and motivates learning. It also allows the class to explore both the ancient text and its interpretation in diverse communities. Finally, the module allows considerable flexibility for student and teacher interest and the needs of a given class.*

Several additional resources related to this article appear online at: <http://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/journal/article.aspx?id=11063>. These include (1) a schedule of possible readings, assignments, and lesson plans, (2) selections from ancient commentary on Genesis 2–3 from scattered sources, and (3) a bibliographic essay noting the usefulness of selected resources related to the module.

The main student complaint I hear about my introductory Old Testament class is that we spend too much time on the first few chapters of Genesis. Both students and professors expect introductory Bible courses to offer a comprehensive survey of content. I have developed (and continue to develop) a modular approach to teaching the Old Testament that values depth at least as highly as

breadth of coverage. The class, *The Old Testament and Its Interpreters*, surveys the Old Testament and the ways in which it has been variously interpreted through the ages. Each class consists of a wide diversity of students with a range of different and sometimes strongly-held notions about the Bible. I use the creation module as an opportunity to challenge student worldviews and explore various approaches to biblical interpretation. While discussing the first few chapters of Genesis, the module also lays the groundwork for the subsequent study of other texts. Although Barry University is a Catholic and Dominican University, the following case study may be suitable for other religious institutions, private colleges, and public universities.

My goals for the course especially focus on developing students' higher-order thinking skills, such as applying general principles already learned to new situations and developing analytic and problem-solving skills. The course is well prepared for these purposes, since students not only study the biblical text, but examine its diverse interpretations among various communities through the ages. In order to understand this diversity, students need to understand the principles and motives driving interpreters (such as various theories of biblical inspiration and interpretation). The modular presentation of creation develops critical thinking skills in students by presenting them with problems and a mass of relevant materials, and then demanding a response. Students must analyze the problem into its parts, discern the various principles guiding the various perspectives, and make up their own minds on the basis of the study.

The first problem I present to the students concerns whether creationism, or more currently intelligent design, should be taught in public school biology classes alongside evolution. I use the particular legal case *Kitzmiller v. Dover Area School District* from a U.S. District Court in Pennsylvania. After the fall 2005

semester, the case was resolved in favor of the plaintiffs, who objected to the notice about intelligent design that teachers would have been required to read in their biology classes before teaching evolution. Even though the legal case has been resolved, it can still be fruitful teaching material, and other similar cases continue to appear.

I give the students a variety of materials pertaining to the Dover case. This case offers several advantages. The political-religious issue engages student interest and attention. While exploring the issue from a biblical studies perspective, they learn about various theories of biblical interpretation and examine the nature of science and how these issues intersect in the political arena. They also become involved in detailed analysis of the biblical texts and learn to decide for themselves among the various possible readings of Genesis and approaches to scripture. In the course of the study, every student has his or her own worldview challenged on some level. This challenge is important pedagogically because many students think they have nothing to learn unless they see their assumptions questioned and ignorance exposed.

At the end of the first class, I give students news items about the case that introduce the political controversy and ask them to write questions that they think are at the heart of the issue. This exercise involves students in the task of asking questions (rather than spouting opinions) and analyzing a large problem into its component parts. In the third class, after I have collated all the questions, we go over the questions and discuss what makes some questions better than others (some students always ask rhetorical questions, which are just statements in disguise). We also look at the various elements involved in the controversy. This assignment begins students' thinking about the issue.

At the start of the first class, I ask volunteers to read each of the six days of creation from Genesis 1. On the board, I keep track of the sequence of creation (light before sun), and begin to draw a picture of the world as described by Genesis 1, noting how it organizes space and time. It is a flat earth with a "firmament, dome, or expanse" that is a solid structure. This structure is called the sky. The sky is blue, we learn, because there is water above it. I indicate that even those who insist on a literal reading of the Bible do not read the text as literally as I have illustrated, but it is the world Genesis (and other biblical texts) describes. If there is time (and this may spill over into the second class), we begin to read the second creation story and I note how the sequence of creation differs from Genesis 1, in addition to stylistic differences (e.g., God is depicted differently). I ask students to make sense of this seeming contradiction and critique various attempts at harmonization while acknowledging that many people accept the proposed harmonizations. I suggest that whoever compiled the book of Genesis had both stories available and deliber-

ately included both even though they were not consistent. I ask why someone might do this. The compiler might have simply deleted one of the stories for the sake of consistency. What would we have lost in that case?

These questions lead students toward what I (clumsily) term a "metaphorical" interpretation of the text. Between the first and second classes, I give students short selections from *Dei Verbum* and "The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy" to read. As we pursue our discussion of Genesis, I borrow *Dei Verbum's* statement that scripture expresses "that truth which God wanted to put into sacred writings for the sake of salvation" (section 12). If we accept that the literal sense of Genesis is nonsense (flat earth, solid sky), then this can not be the truth God wanted to reveal. So what might that truth be? Students begin to articulate what Genesis 1 says about God, creation, and humanity. God is the creator of the universe. Creation is good. It is carefully organized. Humans have a special place in creation and a special relationship with God (we talk a lot about the image of God). By contrast, Genesis 2 seems to say some different things about the world. Creation is more haphazard, although humans are still special. Animals are almost companions of humans, which differs from the dominion of Genesis 1. The text seems to be saying something about the relationship between man and woman (I postpone discussion of what it says), whereas Genesis 1 merely indicates the fact of gender distinction. With some prodding, students begin to see that dropping either story from Genesis would mean losing something worth keeping. Even if the stories seem contradictory on the literal level, the metaphorical meanings may be more complimentary.

By the third class, students have read the Babylonian creation story (*Enuma Elish*). We discuss what this story says about the nature of the universe, the gods, and humans. Students respond negatively to the violence among the gods and the creation of humans to do the work of the gods. They also note some similarities with Genesis. Humans, in all the stories, are partially divine. A few even notice that the sequence of creation and the shape of the physical world in *Enuma Elish* resemble the sequence and shape of Genesis 1. At this point, I try to get students to see creation stories as past-tense narratives that are actually making statements about the present. In other words, these stories make claims about the cosmos and the place of humans within it. They may not really be concerned with past events at all. If the authors were so concerned, then we would expect Genesis 1 and 2 to be consistent.

So far, I am mostly engaged in challenging "fundamentalist" ideas about scripture that inform many creationists. As we turn to look at what science says about the origins of the universe, this challenge continues, but gets a new twist. The National Academy of Sciences article "Evolution and Creationism: A View from the

National Academy of Sciences” is a good, brief description of the scientific creation account (big bang, evolution) for the non-scientist (<http://books.nap.edu/html/creationism/>). I ask students to read the scientific account the same way I asked them to read the creation stories in the Bible and the Enuma Elish. From this exercise, some students begin to appreciate why some people want intelligent design (or something like it) included in the science curriculum. Student responses to the scientific account are almost uniformly negative. They see that science describes a structured and ordered universe, but one that seems indifferent to human existence. As one biology major put it, “Scientifically speaking, human beings are no more important than mice.” Science can offer the human being no greater purpose than to “be fruitful and multiply,” but Genesis also held out the hope of human relationship with a concerned deity, and therefore of a meaning and purpose to human life beyond biological existence.

The scientific creation account seems all the more intimidating because it is scientific. In other words, it describes how things *really* happened. Unlike creation stories from various traditional cultures, the scientific account makes a serious claim for being taken literally. Scientists know about origins that myth-makers had only guessed at. If the scientific account displaces traditional creation accounts, then it also displaces the value and purpose that these accounts articulated for human life. Hopefully, students who previously ridiculed creationists begin to see part of what motivates creationism. At the same time, I do introduce a distinction between text and interpretation. We interpret the Genesis texts as making statements about human existence. We interpret the scientific account in the same way. Herein lies a problem. Science does not and can not say that humans have no purpose beyond survival and reproduction. Science does not and can not prove that there is no God. But since we humans are so quick to interpret everything, we find meaning in the scientific account that is not exactly there. In short, I suggest the possibility of accepting the “literal” scientific account of origins while still believing in the “metaphorical” meanings of the Genesis stories.

Students continue to consider these issues as they read a series of materials concerning the attempts of religious and scientific figures to reconcile Genesis and science, as well as the objections of some who say no such reconciliation is possible. These materials include Pope John Paul II’s address to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences on evolution on October 22, 1996; Cardinal Schönborn’s letter to the editor in the *New York Times* from July 7, 2005; a letter to Pope Benedict XXVI from leading scientists reacting negatively to Schönborn’s letter; and some summary views from Christians who believe evolution is incompatible with Christian faith. (These resources can be located on the internet; see

related bibliographic essay online at: <http://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/journal/article.aspx?id=11063>.) These materials offer an opportunity to learn about what science is, what its limits are, how it operates, and what a scientific theory is. For homework, I ask students to consider whether they think evolution and Genesis are compatible. You may be surprised how many biology majors do not believe in evolution.

So far, the course has focused on issues of biblical interpretation and science. Next, I turn to consideration of the purpose of education, which is one of the questions at stake in the Dover case. I assign Immanuel Kant’s essay “What is Enlightenment?” and some material on the separation of church and state in the United States (many foreign students, but not only foreign students, have little grasp of the First Amendment). These materials include the First Amendment to the Constitution of the United States, Thomas Jefferson’s famous “wall of separation” letter, and summaries of selected Supreme Court decisions (these can also be found on the internet). In class, we discuss the purposes of public school education (why have a public school system) and the purposes of science education (and whether intelligent design contributes to its goals). However, I especially want to bring students around to considering the purposes of their own education: why they are in college at all. If you ask students why they are in college, you may be surprised at how non-mercenary their answers can be. This discussion normally results in distinctions among indoctrination, training, and education. It also allows me the opportunity to indicate my own ideas about what a college education is for and why I teach the way I do. It is my best opportunity to respond to complaints that we are spending too much time on the first few chapters of Genesis. I hope that the questions raised also lead students to be more thoughtful and deliberate about their own educational goals and more attentive to their own learning.

The class so far largely rounds out the major points I wanted to address in the case study. The emphasis on biblical interpretation and how it may or may not be influenced by a rational critique of scripture lays foundations for the rest of the semester. From the beginning, students realize that there are many ways to read scripture and they are reasonably informed about what these ways are and what motivates those who adopt various approaches. The next problem of the creation module explores Genesis 2–3 and focuses more on the moral critique of scripture.

In this relatively brief module, I examine two questions: (1) Does Genesis 2–3 support or undermine patriarchy, and (2) does the story indicate a “fall” or a “rise.” For the first question, we look at the text in detail. I find I can count on students to identify the textual features traditionally used to claim that the story supports patriarchy. A few (usually female) students are capable

of addressing how some of these textual features can be interpreted differently. Ultimately, students read a selection of traditional patriarchal readings and Phyllis Tribble's modern feminist interpretation. A helpful exercise has been to ask students to articulate the advantages of patriarchy (for men and for women) before discussing its disadvantages, since many students have not considered the first question.

The second question concerns the traditional Christian reading of the narrative as a "fall" associated with original sin. Original sin allows me the opportunity to illustrate how scripture alone is not the basis for the doctrine, but that tradition plays a significant role as well. One handout illustrates the development of the doctrine into modern times, when many think it can no longer be grounded in a literal reading of the text because there was no Adam and Eve and no Garden of Eden. The traditional readings are challenged in modern times by other interpretations. Students read Immanuel Kant's "Conjectures on the Beginning of Human History," which represent a reading of the Genesis story as a "rise" from a primitive, animal-like existence to fully human life and civilization. These two readings of the same text, along with the previous Kant reading on enlightenment, help to crystallize for students the difference between traditional Christian values and modern Enlightenment values, which are at the root of many disputes in biblical interpretation.

The modular approach to teaching creation has several advantages. It can challenge the worldviews of the students, no matter what worldviews these are. Students raised on a literal reading of scripture must confront a variety of problems with creationism and become aware of the diversity within creationism circles (e.g., "young earth" vs. "old earth" creationism, see <http://www.talkorigins.org/faqswic.html>). Students who already accept the rational critique of scripture gain insight into what motivates more literalistic readings and discover that their own opinions are more problematic than they may have realized. Secularist students who may not have considered the value of religious traditions at all must confront a variety of religious and not-so-religious readings of Genesis in which they may discover much that is of value. In this way, religious students can discern the diversity of religious positions in the classroom and move beyond merely dogmatic confrontation into more serious consideration of biblical interpretation. My intention is that everyone becomes more open-minded and intellectually sophisticated. The skills they develop in reading biblical texts and considering one political controversy can be reapplied to any number of controversies and

texts. My hope is that by examining relatively few texts in significant depth, students will develop the higher-level thinking skills needed to read and interpret other texts (including non-biblical ones) independently.

The modular approach engages students' interest by presenting them with contemporary questions that matter. Genesis is not merely an ancient and primitive text, but part of several living traditions that continue to influence our world. Class discussions are frequently lively without being argumentative and often (but not always) achieve wide participation. I know at least some students continue their discussions outside class (sometimes with me), and the science, education, and pre-law majors are interested to see their own disciplines introduced into a course on the Bible.

My twin goals of examining the biblical texts and their interpretation are well served by the module. The course forces serious consideration of the texts in detail, while keeping a constant eye on the general issues of biblical interpretation and diverse interpretive traditions. The foundations laid in the creation module serve the students well for the remainder of the semester. They have discussed biblical interpretation so extensively that as we continue to read through the Old Testament, I need only to remind them of these diverse interpretive approaches without having to rehash them at length. This observation is a testimony to not only what students learn in this module, but also how well they retain what they have learned.

A final advantage of the modular approach is its flexibility. Each year, the course materials are slightly different, as I try to select current resources. The problem is one of too many rather than too few, though I can allocate time differently for different classes. I generally do not spend much time on the church-state issue, but some classes need more time with it than others. Some classes need more rudimentary explanation of science. As the class discussions evolve, I can rearrange or substitute materials to fit the needs of the class and the direction of its conversation. In short, since we are exploring a controversy, we are not tied too closely to a simple progression through the Bible, but can follow questions where they lead.

Above, I have made some elaborate claims about the benefits of teaching creation with a modular approach. I should caution, however, that these claims are based on experience and my sense of the students. I have not yet developed adequate assessment instruments to determine whether the module is actually accomplishing all the goals I hope to achieve.

Copyright of Teaching Theology & Religion is the property of Blackwell Publishing Limited and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.