

## **Creation & Evolution**

### **Creation and evolution and all that stuff...**

*I am passionately committed to broad theological thinking. The following deliberations on the creation/evolution debate are drawn from a paper put together by a theological research team – I asked them to look at this issue with reference to this year’s Darwin anniversaries - 200 years since his birth and 150 years since the first publication of his book *The Origin of Species*. I hope this review will be a useful resource to many. The aim is not provide a definitive answer but to identify key issues that need to be considered.*

So, to start at the very beginning... Even amongst Bible believing Christians there is debate about how Genesis 1 & 2 relates to modern science. It should be possible to identify areas that all Christians should agree on and then subsequently to look at three alternative answers that evangelical Christians have given on this topic.

The basic events of Genesis 1-11 find some parallels in other ancient writings from the ancient Near East. Three of the most famous are:  
*Atrahasi Epic* - which depicts creation and early human history.  
*Enuma Elish* - contains a creation account  
*Gilgamesh Epic* - in which Gilgamesh, ruler of Uruk, experiences numerous adventures, including meeting with the only survivor of a great deluge, Utnapishtim.

It is not the similarities between Genesis and these other ancient stories that is striking, but the differences. When looked at, Genesis’ unique and far superior nature is obvious. So, in the other ancient accounts there are a multitude of gods who are limited in power and knowledge. Besides that they are not always very moral. In these stories, humankind - far from being the crown of creation is an after-thought – in one we are created to help out the lesser gods who had the job of feeding the rest of the divine beings and the flood was sent because we couldn’t do that without making too much noise!

### **The Creator in His rightful place!**

In complete contrast to the stories from the ancient Near East, Genesis reveals there is only one God, who is unique and without equal. He is all powerful and completely holy. God creates everything out of nothing and all that He makes is good. Creation has an order and purpose because God made it; life therefore is not pointless but meaningful and humanity’s role and destiny is unique. We are the only creature made the subject of divine deliberation, “let us make him in our own image” (Gen 1:26), and though made out of the dust of the earth and so linked with all creation, we are the only one to receive the breath of God (Gen 2:7). Adam and Eve are made in His image and given the role of stewards of creation. (Gen 1:27-28) So, far from being an also-ran, men and women are seen to be the climax of God’s creative activity.

The simplicity of Genesis is deceptive for, though briefly told, the account of creation undermines alternative religions and philosophies - ancient and modern. The Bible leaves no room for polytheism, pantheism, dualism, fatalism or materialism or any other ‘ism’ which dethrones the one true God or robs human life of dignity or purpose. On this all Christians should agree.

## How long is a day?

Given that the primary purpose of the Bible is not to teach science, how much should we take account of what we read in Genesis 1-2 in our thinking about the origins of humans and the whole cosmos? Here's what a great theologian of the early church wrote about the different approaches adopted in his day.

*On this subject there are three main views. According to the first, some wish to understand paradise only in a material way. According to the second, others wish to take it only in a spiritual way. According to the third, others understand it both ways, taking some things materially and others spiritually. If I may briefly mention my own, I prefer the third.* Augustine of Hippo (354 – 430 AD)

The dominant view for the church up to the end of 17<sup>th</sup> century was a literal reading of Genesis 1 & 2. Others would call it a flat, naïve or superficial reading. But taking these early chapters of Genesis as a straightforward account of what happened, then in six 24 hours God created the heavens and the earth. *For those that know the God of the Bible the issue is not how He could have created everything in 6 days but why He took so long!*

Augustine argues against creation in six days and thinks it all appeared instantaneously - in a moment. Some would say that those who believe that the Bible is God's inspired authoritative word should be committed to the 'creation in six 24 hour days' view. For though the term 'day' can be used metaphorically or generally for a long period of time, in Genesis the phrase 'evening and morning' clearly points to a 24 hour period. Also the narrative of Genesis runs seamlessly from the creation of the world to Adam and Eve and then through their family to Abraham and beyond. As we do not doubt that events associated with Abraham are to be read literally shouldn't we also read the accounts of Adam and Eve in the same way? The NT writers seem to implicitly accept the historicity of these accounts. (Luke 3:38; Rom 5:14, 1 Cor 15:22, 45; 1 Tim 2:13-14)

## When did death come into it?

There are two other weighty objections to reading the creation accounts in any other way than a literal one. The first is the explanation of the origin of death (Gen 2:16-17, Rom 5:12). If death only became a reality after the Fall then the long period of history that modern evolutionary science assumes simply did not take place. Secondly, the justification for the Sabbath is rooted in the seven day pattern of creation. (Exodus 20:8,11).

These are impressive arguments but they have not convinced everyone. Three main questions marks have been raised against this interpretation of Genesis. These relate to the purpose of Genesis, its genre - i.e. the type of literature it is and the relationship between human knowledge and scripture. These will be picked up later as the other two approaches to the creation/evolution debate are discussed, but one further point needs be noted. *Some who hold the literal reading of Genesis do so 'with an unbecoming belligerence which threatens with the name apostate those who step out of line.'* (from translator's foreword, *In the Beginning: the Opening Chapters of Genesis* - Henri Blocher)

### Further Reading

*Three Views on Creation and Evolution* – edited by J P Moreland & John Mark Reynolds

*Over 25 Questions on Creation/Evolution and the Bible* - Ken Ham

*In the Beginning: The Opening Chapters of Genesis* by Henri Blocher

## **'Where did we come from, Daddy?'**

The motto of those who argue for six 24 hour days of creation is 'Its Just As It Says in the Book'. Those who offer alternative explanations reply, 'But God has written in two books, not just one'. Beside the Bible, God has written the book of nature (Romans 1: 20.) *God's two books need to be read and interpreted in the light of each other.* Ultimately there can be no conflict between the truth of science and the truth of the Bible, for God is the truth behind them both. Without this insight the church would still be trying to censor those who teach that the earth is not the centre of the universe because the Bible 'teaches' the sun rises and sets and so circles the earth - not vice versa. So, one of the reasons that some Christians do not hold to creation in six 24 hour days is a different understanding of the relationship between science and the Bible.

*The original polemical context of the Bible's account of creation was not aimed at demolishing anything like modern evolutionary science but rather the polytheistic myths of the surrounding nations with all their distorting views of both God and man.* And the positive function of the creation account is similar to a parent who tells their 3 year old that their new baby brother came from the love mummy has for their daddy. Such an explanation won't get a good mark in A Level biology but in context it is true and can be understood by anyone, anywhere, at any time.

### **Do we have to choose?**

Genesis contains clear signs of being a carefully crafted literary work. Note the repeated patterns of the numbers of 3, 7 and 10. Ten times we are told "God says", three times in relation to humans and seven times to the other creatures. A similar pattern can be traced with the phrase "let there be..." On three occasions the writer uses "create". Along the same lines is the observation that the 6 days of creation can be seen as a poetic or literary framework rather than an attempt to map out the exact sequence of events. So, in the first three days God gives form to creation and then in the next three days he fills each form.

Day 1: Day and Night	Day 4: Sun & Moon
Day 2: Sky & Sea	Day 5: Birds & Fish etc
Day 3: Land	Day 6: Animals & Humans
Day 7: Sabbath	

For some these considerations mean that there is no need to see any conflict between modern evolutionary science and the Bible account of creation. This is what the conservative Bible commentator Derek Kidner says in his Tyndale Commentary on Genesis - a view that John Stott is open to. And most recently, Denis Alexander has written a whole book arguing that biblical faith is "entirely compatible with the Darwinian view of evolution" (*Creation or Evolution: Do we have to Choose?* - Denis Alexander)

### **Mind the gap!**

Those who hold the view that biblical faith and the Darwinian view of evolution are compatible believe it removes an unnecessary stumbling block to faith and honours the consensus of scientists working in widely different fields of research.

But, science is not infallible - *history reveals times when scholarly opinion goes through a revolutionary revision and the church has found, to its cost, the danger of hitching its wagon too tightly to any one version of contemporary wisdom.* The

most serious issue with this 'compatible' view is the concern that it undermines key elements of biblical revelation. If death is introduced only after the fall of Adam and Eve then it appears that the earth is only a few thousand years old, not the billions claimed by current science. If chance is a key factor, does that exclude the idea of God from consideration? What happens to the theological justification of the Sabbath?

For those less confident in evolutionary science but not convinced that Genesis 1-3 should be read literally, there are numerous attempts to chart some sort of middle course. Some are more successful than others. So there is the 'gap theory' which argues that Genesis 1: 2 should not be translated, "Now the earth **was** formless and empty" but rather "...**became** formless..." It is then argued that after the original creation in verse 1 and before what is recorded in verse 2 there was a catastrophe in which the original creation was virtually destroyed and what we have in Genesis is really the remodelling of creation. It is then proposed that this gap between verses 1 and 2 could have lasted millions, if not billions, of years and it was in this time that dinosaurs etc roamed the earth.

*Technically, it is possible to translate Genesis 1:2 as suggested but even that is highly speculative and the rest of the argument squeezes rather a lot into the silent space between the two sentences!* The other of the most popular theories in this category is the 'day/age theory'. In this, the days of creation are taken to be vast periods of time broadly equivalent to different geological ages. While very popular - and parallels can be recognised - they are not exact and so not fully convincing.

### **Final Thoughts on Creation and Evolution**

B. B. Warfield (1851 – 1921) was a great 19<sup>th</sup> century Reformed theologian, who stoutly defended the authority and inspiration of the Bible and other fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith - but when it came to evolution he was agnostic! *He neither totally rejected it nor unreservedly welcomed it as an explanation.* He thought that in some form the theory could be true but does not appear to have given it a final stamp of approval. His attitude of openness to science and humility before scripture is one that is appealing.

*Does loyalty to scripture demand holding the view that God created the universe in six 24 days and that it is less than 20,000 years old?* Not all are convinced. And yet many would hold that death as we know it came into the world through a real fall of the first two human beings and that the Sabbath principle is rooted in creation. Exactly how these relate to modern science is more of an open question. That evolutionary principles have been the basis of significant scientific breakthrough is without doubt but all that can be concluded from this fact is that evolution is a useful hypothesis - it doesn't prove that it is ultimately true. The key is that this whole cosmos (and us included!) is not the product of chance and time but the creation of the sovereign, holy, loving God of the Bible. This means we are not alone in the universe - we have been made for a purpose which finds its fulfilment in Christ.

One final book: *Creation and Evolution* by Alan Hayward

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