

Reflections on reading Genesis 1

by Ray Galea

As we look at the first chapter of Genesis, we are forced to consider several important questions which can't be addressed in a sermon due to lack of time.

MBM takes an open hand view of the age of the earth and the dating of creation. We understand Christians hold a range of views on this important matter, and there are good arguments for, and against, each position.

In over 30 years of ministry, I've seen the way some from each side of the fence accuse the other view.

For example, some six-day creationists tend to accuse others for not believing the bible and selling out to science and evolution. Some who have taken an old earth view, see six-day creationists as being stupid or poor readers of the genre or style of Genesis 1.

Can I urge that we refrain from such language and "speak the truth in love" (Eph 4:15)? What is clear from the bible is that our discussions are to be marked by grace and respect (2 Tim 2:25).

Bible believing Christians agree on 90-95% of what Genesis 1-2 is teaching. The conflict between Christians is in one main area. I'm not saying it's unimportant, but we need to be clear that we all agree on a series of truths that we deeply hold and are non-negotiable. Some of those truths are listed at the end of this paper.

We also need to remember that while the bible is infallible, our reading of it is not, and nor is science's. The bible does not change. Our commitment to the word of God is not compromised when we take seriously any question which challenges our "understanding" of the bible text. We are constantly on a never-ending loop of coming to the scriptures with questions and seeing whether our understanding of the text is correct.

The authority is not in the question, it must always be in the text. The questions raised by the world (science, feminism, psychology etc.) however, may simply help us to see whether we have either 'over read' the passage and concluded more than it intends to say, or 'under read' the passage and let it say less than it intended to say.

For example, science has caused us to re-think the origins of both the universe and biological life. It's not wrong to re-think our interpretation of Genesis 1-2 with the questions raised by science. What we must never do is hand the authority of the bible over to science or any other source. If what we conclude from the bible is seen as foolish in the eyes of the world, then so what?! The resurrection was laughed at when Paul shared it to Athenians in Acts 17.

Hold your ground and hold your nerve since we are accountable to just one person, The Lord God, whose opinion is the only one that matters. This also means that when other Christians accuse you, claiming you've sold-out to science or that you're being too literalistic, make sure you have thought hard about what God is saying from the bible and hold to it graciously and clearly.

1. Science and Christianity: Friend or Foe

We are often told that Science and Christianity have had a long history of conflict over who has the correct explanation for the origins of biological life and the physical universe. The apparent conflict is real but is often promoted too strongly by those opposed to Christianity. For a start, the birth of modern science in the 16th century was led mostly by Christian scientists such as the world renowned chemist Robert Boyle. Such men sought to identify natural explanations for the natural world. Their goal was not to disprove God but to glorify him.

The supposed conflict between Science and Christianity has been exploited by some with other agendas. For example, Thomas Huxley who was called Darwin's bulldog used the then new theory of the evolution of species by natural selection to attack the authority of the church. What is interesting is that Thomas Huxley privately claimed that he didn't even believe in evolution. It was a means to an end.

Part of the problem is that both Science and Christianity can lay claim to more than either community can provide reasoning for. Some Christians turn the bible into a detailed geological record claiming that the bible tells us the age of the earth when it simply doesn't. Others view Science as offering explanations for things beyond its capability to assess, such as the meaning of life or the existence of God – a favourite ploy used by atheists like Richard Dawkins.

Christian apologist and Professor of Mathematics at Oxford University, John Lennox, uses the example of a cake¹ to help us understand what both Science and Christianity can each teach us.

When we look at a cake, the science can tell us what the ingredients and quantities are in its make-up. It can explain the mathematics, chemistry and physics of the ingredients combining, cooking and calorie count. However, it can't explain who made the cake, why s/he made the cake and what s/he thinks about the cake? So, unless the cake maker reveals the answers to these questions, then no amount of scientific know-how will be able to discover it.

As valuable and magnificent as Science can be in teaching us about the natural world - how it works, what it's made of, and perhaps even how old it is, we need to also acknowledge its limitations. That is, science cannot answer the questions of:

- Who created the universe?
- Why did God create the universe?
- What does God think about it? And,
- What is his purpose for Humans in that plan?

It is not within the scope of science to be able to answer such questions.

¹ John C. Lennox, *God's Undertaker: Has Science Buried God?* (Oxford: Lion Hudson, 2009), 1.

Consider when Jesus said, “Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father.” (Matt 10:29) Jesus was not giving the only explanation to the question concerning why sparrows fall to the ground. Jesus was not rejecting the study of the biology of bacteria that may have killed the bird or the physics of gravity that drew the bird to the ground. Biology and Physics both give true explanations. They are natural explanations for the natural world or what some call the secondary explanations. However, the ultimate explanation is that our Father in heaven numbered the days of the bird and brought it to the ground. One explanation does not, and should not, exclude the other.

2. Different views among Christians

2.1 Literature and interpretation

How you view the type of literature in Genesis 1-2 may play a part in how you interpret the content. The genre or style of literature may determine which questions you think the passage is answering.

If, as some Christians believe that Genesis 1 is a poetic schema (or exalted prose) structured around 6 chronological days as a literary device, then they conclude that the passage is answering questions such as ‘who made the world’, ‘what God thought of it’, ‘what is his purpose for creating it’ (who, what, why) but not necessarily see it answering the ‘how’ and ‘when’ questions.

Others see a parallel with Revelation 21-22 and the creation of a new heavens and earth at the end of the bible. They would say, since the apocalyptic literature of Revelation is not read with a literalistic grid, nor should Genesis 1-2.

Some like Tim Keller see the relationship between Genesis 1 and 2 similar to the relationship between the historical events of Exodus 12-14 with the song of Moses and Miriam in Exodus 15. The latter celebrates in song the historical events of the former. (See also Judges 4-5). Keller suggests that Genesis 1 could be a poetic or stylized retelling of Genesis 2 and therefore should not be pressed for details on dating.

The issue comes down to whether God is intending to tell us in Genesis 1 that the whole creation took place in a literal week and so we must reject science’s claim of the age of the earth and the universe as a result.

2.2 Old Earth View

Christians who take an old earth view read the 6 days as six acts of creation spread over a long period of time. Many are open to theistic evolution. Some see a large time gap between Genesis 1:1 and 1:2.

The old earth view holds that God disrupted his normal providential direction of the natural world with special acts of creation over a long period of time. This view accepts the established scientific community understanding on dating and would not have dinosaurs living at the same time as humans. In this framework, the creation of humans is not the result of the evolution of early hominids but a special act of creation of Adam

and Eve. This view holds that death was part of the natural world and that Adam's sin only resulted in the death of humans.

2.3 Young Earth

Young earth readers view Genesis 1 as describing six 24 hour days in a literal 7-day week and as a result hold to the necessity for a young earth. Some in the camp use the genealogies of the bible to work out the age of the earth. The famous Bishop Usher claimed that the earth was approximately 6,000 years old.

The young earth view is the one most likely to clash with modern scientific consensus that the universe is approximately 13.7 billion years old. They claim that whether Genesis 1 is poetic or not this chapter is answering not just the 'who' 'what' and 'why' but the 'how' and 'when' of creation as well.

The six-day creation view argues that all species of plants and animals were created in this one week as described in Genesis 1. In other words, T-Rex and Adam lived together.

This position holds that since death came through the sin of one man Adam (Rom 5) to the whole of creation and not just humans, there could not have been a prior evolutionary process. Evolution necessitates death for the existence of new species. The constant struggle for the survival of successful mutations which are better suited to their environment requires the death of the unsuccessful mutations.

Young earth adherents accept micro-evolution (e.g. mutating viruses such as COVID19), but not macro-evolution and the creation of new species.

The one non-negotiable for every Christian is the rejection of a Naturalistic Evolution which ignores God's sovereign hand in the creation of every species.

2.4 Ancient creation accounts

For the modern reader, Genesis 1 is often seen as a reaction against evolution. However, Moses who wrote Genesis 1 did not have science in mind but may have had the creation stories of the surrounding nations. Whether he did or not, it is very fruitful to do a comparison of Genesis 1-2 and ancient near eastern creation stories. Much like reading the Qur'an to appreciate the uniqueness of the Bible all the more.

For a long time those who engaged in the studies of religion delighted in showing the similarities because they were committed to proving that either all religions worship the same God or more likely that all religions are man-made and therefore mythical. This movement tended to see religion as evolving, making the Jewish creation account in Genesis 1 as a more sophisticated development of the other ancient stories.

What they often failed to do is show how profoundly different Genesis 1 is to other creation stories. **Genesis 1 has but one God who created everything, out of nothing, by the power of his word, with humans taking pride of place.** In contrast, something like the Babylonian creation story called Enumah Elish has a number of gods involved who

do not create out of nothing but out of the remains of a god who is killed and whose upper body was used for the heavens and whose lower body for the earth.

While Genesis 1 depicts one God who creates effortlessly by the power of his word, the ancient gods create with conflict and violence using pre-existing material. In ancient near eastern accounts humans were created to serve the victorious gods by offering sacrifices.

In contrast, listen to what Paul says to the Greeks in Athens who worship many gods.

The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else. (Acts 17: 24-25)

3. Some further questions to consider

If Genesis 1 is Hebrew poetry (or highly structured/stylised literature), does that necessarily mean it can't be read as a literal six days of creation? In Exodus 20:8-11 when God gives the 4th commandment to work 6 days and rest on the 7th he does appear to literally interpret the 6 days of Genesis 1 assuming they are six 24 hour days. This becomes the pattern to be mirrored in the life of God's people who are to work 6 days and rest on the 7th. We read, "For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day." (Exodus 20:11).

However, we are simply not given the age of the earth or the universe in the bible. Gen 1:1 and 1:2 may be separated by a vast amount of time. We know from Matthew 1 that genealogies can skip 4 or 5 generations. It is not their purpose to be used to count back in time.

As you read Genesis 1 chronologically there are internal problems such as the creation of light (Day 1) existing before Sun and Moon (Day 4) and Vegetation (Day 3) existing before the creation of the Sun (Day 4).

Romans 5:17 speaks of death coming through Adam to humans. The text does not explicitly speak of death coming to the rest of creation (e.g. animals) because of Adam's sin. Some suggest it is possible that outside the garden creation was not perfect and that death already reigned and that man was evicted into that creation which was already groaning.

Even though creation is good it does not stop God placing Satan in the garden. Can creation be good and yet have death awaiting its liberation from decay when Jesus returns? Was the purpose of Adam and Eve in the Garden to extend the garden into the rest of the earth which was already marked by some degree of chaos?

Letting Scripture Interpret Scripture

I personally think one of the most important principles when reading the bible is to see how the rest of the bible interprets the passage. When the creation story of Genesis 1 is picked up and retold many times in the rest of the bible (such as Job 38-42 and Psalm 104), the mention of 6 days is not picked up except in relation to the Sabbath command (Exodus 20). That is to say when the bible writers reflect on the doctrine of creation the “when” question is ignored. In the New Testament, the only reference to time in creation other than the phrase ‘In the beginning’, is once in Hebrews 4 concerning 7th day and that is a quote from Genesis (Heb 4:4, Gen 2:2) which focuses on the theology of rest. God’s word does not seem to want to focus on the ‘time’ question when it discusses creation.

It is critical to remember that faith in the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ alone saves and the gospel summaries either refer directly to the doctrine of creation (Romans 1, Acts 14:15, 17:24) or assume it. My point is that the timing of creation is not included in those summaries.

So, let us be open handed when talking about our different understandings on when creation took place and how long but let us be closed handed when it comes to understanding the following about creation;

- There is one God who creates (Father, Son and Spirit).
- He created all things (physical and spiritual).
- Out of nothing (Ex nihilo – the Latin term used against early heresies).
- From chaos to order with purpose and meaning.
- By His word (and God said...).
- Though His Spirit (Spirit hovering over waters).
- For God’s glory and praise (Rev 4:11).
- Creation is very good (1 Tim 4:4).
- Humans are uniquely made to rule and manage this earth, under God, as image bearers-Male and Female.
- Adam and Eve and the Garden of Eden are historical realities (Acts 17:26, Rom 5:17).
- Creation will enter into God’s eternal rest.

We must also be clear that the Biblical doctrine of creation rejects the following;

Atheism (no God) **Agnosticism** (uncertain about God) **Materialism** (matter only exists) **Polytheism** (many gods) **Pantheism** (nature is God) **Animism** (spirits indwell nature) **Deism** (universe runs by itself with laws given by God) **Naturalistic Evolution.**

The Discovery Institute² identified five areas of science that pose serious problems for neo-Darwinianism:

1. Genetics: Mutations cause harm and do not build complexity.
2. Biochemistry: Unguided and random processes cannot produce cellular complexity.
3. Palaeontology: The fossil record lacks intermediate fossils.
4. Taxonomy: Biologists have failed to construct Darwin's "Tree of Life".
5. Chemistry: The chemical origin of life remains an unsolved mystery.

² Justin Taylor, "5 scientific problems with current theories of biological and chemical evolution." Jan 21, 2015 <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justin-taylor/5-scientific-problems-with-current-theories-of-biological-and-chemical-evolution/>