

The Garden Story Never Happened. The Garden Story Always Happens.

Section 1: Multiple Creation Stories in Genesis

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Section 2: Scientific Problems and the Creation Accounts

Christianity has a long history of both advancing and fighting science. John Calvin famously wrote:

“We will see some who are so deranged, not only in religion but who in all things reveal their monstrous nature, that they will say that the sun does not move, and that it is the earth which shifts and turns. When we see such minds we must indeed confess that the devil possess them, and that God sets them before us as mirrors, in order to keep us in his fear. So it is with all who argue out of pure malice, and who happily make a show of their imprudence.”¹

People who thought the earth moved were deemed deranged and possessed by the devil at one time but this isn't as bad as it seems. Incorrect beliefs can be *warranted* and the proponents of them like Calvin can be intellectually forgiven. It is customary for pre-scientific people to embrace pre-scientific ideas and it takes time for major paradigm shifts to occur in human thinking. Conventional knowledge at the time would tell Calvin the sun moved and the earth stood still. The Bible is, after all, “unashamedly geocentric.”² Sometimes scientific progress is at odds with what has been considered the plain understandings of Scripture for hundreds if not thousands of years. In today's world it is no longer heliocentric vs geocentric ideology. For most that issue has fully worked itself out but now we have biological evolution lopsidedly battling intelligent design in the limelight. It is true that scientific errors appear scattered throughout the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures. Parts of the Bible refer to the four

¹ —John Calvin, “Sermon on 1 Corinthians 10:19-24”, *Calvini Opera Selecta, Corpus Refomatorum*, Vol 49, 677, trans. by Robert White in “*Calvin and Copernicus: the Problem Reconsidered*”, *Calvin Theological Journal* 15 (1980), p233-243, at 236-237:

² To use Derek Kidner's phrasing in regards to the fourth day in *Genesis an Introduction and Commentary*.

corners of the earth (Is. 11:12) , think thoughts come from our kidneys (Psalm 16:7), believe there is a solid firmament in the sky (Job 37:18), proclaims much to Galileo's chagrin, the earth is immutable and does not move (1 Chron 16:30; Ps 93:1, 96:10, 104:5; Is 45:8), that the earth is flat (Mt 4:8, Dan 4:10-11), stars are small and close enough to the earth they can fall from the sky and land on it (Rev 6:13-16, 8:10; Mt 2:10, 24:29; Dan 8:10). A host of problems are also evident if the details of Genesis 1-2 are taken as literal, factual history. A sampling is presented below and all of these texts could be multiplied several times over. We can certainly quibble over some of these potential conflicts and debate their intended meaning but overall, they make a pretty compelling case that God did not intend to leave us a scientific guide to creation nor did he feel the need to override the incorrect scientific and cosmological background knowledge of the Biblical authors. They, unaware of the Scopes Monkey trial, clearly were not concerned with the same scientific issues as us. By proxy it doesn't seem God was either when inspiring our Sacred Scripture. Maybe we should pattern ourselves after His likeness!

Some Problems With The First Creation Account:

1. God creates the heavens and the earth together "in the beginning" but we now know that roughly 9 billion years separates the origin of our universe and the formation of the earth
2. The earth is incorrectly described as being created before the sun. The earth and sun formed out of the same cloud of dust and gas (solar nebula) and that order should be reversed as the sun proper probably existed before the earth proper fully accreted.
3. The text describes there being evening and morning without a sun!
4. Describing the sun and moon as being created at the same time is also incorrect as the moon is thought to be the result of the coalescence of debris caused by the collision of a massive body with the early earth. This means the moon was formed after the earth.
5. It describes plants and fruit trees existing before the sun and the moon. Obviously sunlight is needed for photosynthesis and the sun must predate plants. Ancient authors would presumably understand the importance of sunlight for growing things which is probably a hint this is not meant to be a historical-scientific narrative. Though many other creation myths also do something similar in having night and day before the sun!³
6. Technically the moon is not a light as it only reflects sunlight but this phenomenological statement which occurs in several parts of the Bible, including the lips of Jesus, is not considered problematic by many. No more than mentioning a "sunrise" is despite us knowing that the sun does not actually rise.
7. The stars in the sky are created after the earth on day four. We know stars predate the earth and we are literally composed of star dust and our sun is probably a third-generation star.
8. The earth (in a formless void state) and waters predate the creation of light itself. Light formed shortly (seconds) after the big bang (photon epoch) many billions of years ago. The majority of the elements on earth, including all the oxygen in H₂O, formed via nucleosynthesis in now

³ Hugh Ross suggested that if we understand the Genesis account as being written from the perspective of an earthbound observer (through visions), then the sun and stars could have been created long before the earth but only *appeared* later on day or epoch four when the atmosphere went from opaque to transparent at some point in the earth's long history. This has several difficulties, one being what a straightforward translation of the text actually states, another is that it assumes a very narrow context and finally it does not resolve the majority of the problems in the text. This pattern is also evident in other ancient near eastern creation accounts. Ross accepts the antiquity of the earth but denies the overwhelming evidence for evolution. So what can initially appear to be an ingenious solution is actually bad, backpedaling eisegesis invented to circumvent clear errors in the text when the literary genre of Genesis is misidentified.

deceased stars over billions of years. Water simply did not exist in the beginning of our universe and it most certainly does not predate light.

9. The order of creation is off in that marine life started before fruit trees and grasses started on land. Also if the “great sea monsters” represent whales, we now know they are relatively recent on the evolutionary ladder appearing roughly 50 million years ago--after the non-avian dinosaurs were extinct. Life, both plant and animal, probably existed in the ocean for a very long time before on land.
10. The account mentions a firmament in the sky separating the waters above and below probably representing incorrect ancient cosmology. Robert Alter says “The Hebrew *raki'a* suggests a hammered-out slab . . .”⁴ There are no waters above in space or solid firmament preventing space travel, much to the chagrin of conspiracy theorists who think the lunar landings were staged. The stars, our sun and moon are not held in the sky by any solid “dome” that God lives above. The account itself starts with God hovering over these waters, probably not what we would perceive as a global ocean today.
11. The earth is much older than a literalistic interpretation of Genesis suggests (see radiometric dating, transit time for light, the fossil record and geologic column, etc.).

Some Problems With The Second Creation Account

1. The first man is created, apparently as mature human being out of dust from the ground. Humans are actually part of a long product of evolution that started billions of years before them.
2. Humans were also not around **before** land animals and the first woman was not created after both land animals and the first man nor was she created out of the first man’s rib!
3. I also get the impression Genesis 2 incorrectly suggests the first human was created before it ever had rained!

Divine Accommodation

There is no realistic way to harmonize a literalistic interpretation of Genesis 1-2 or some other portions of the Bible with some of the most basic findings of modern science.⁵ Physics, geology, astronomy and biology all stand at odds with a literal Genesis. From this, for one who subscribes to Biblical inspiration, it is only natural to conclude God accommodated his message through time-conditioned revelation. Some think this makes God out to be a liar but interacting with people on their level in their own culture, with ideas they can understand seems the most effective method of communication to me.⁶ God has to condescend himself no matter how he communicates with us sinful human beings. Much more needs to be said on accommodation but for those who label this lying, I wonder if Jesus was equally a liar or being deceptive when he used phenomenological language in conjunction with the conventional knowledge of the time in stating the sun rises in Matthew 5:45 or thinking that stars could fall from the sky (Mt

⁴ Robert Alter, *Genesis: Translation and Commentary*.

⁵ See above and also the following for a more complete listing of verses on creation that I shamelessly poached from McKnight and Venema’s *Adam and the Human Genome*: Job 38–41; Pss. 19; 74:13–16; 136; Prov. 8; Isa. 40–45; Jer. 10:12–16; 27:5)

⁶ John Calvin would apparently agree, “The Holy Spirit had no intention to teach astronomy; and, in proposing instruction meant to be common to the simplest and most uneducated persons, he made use by Moses and the other Prophets of popular language, that non might shelter himself under the pretext of obscurity, as we will see men sometimes very readily pretend an incapacity to understand, when anything deep or recondite is submitted to their notice. Accordingly, as Saturn though bigger than the moon is not so to the eye owing to its greater distance, the Holy Spirit would rather speak childishly than unintelligibly to the humble and unlearned.” Calvin on Psalm 136

24:29)? Only a village atheist would find fault with Jesus for not saying, “God causes the earth to rotate and therefore, the sun appears to rise on the just and unjust.” Correct cosmology in this case is superfluous to the point Jesus is making and it doesn’t matter for Genesis either which doesn’t attempt to resolve whether or not we evolved or the first human was spontaneously created mature from the dust in the ground. That is a modern issue the authors of Genesis knew nothing about living in a pre-scientific culture. They knew next to nothing about the distance past and there were no witnesses available. What *is* emphatically stated in the first two chapters of Genesis is that God is our creator, he is all-powerful with no rivals, humans are made in his image, man and woman are meant to join together and we are stewards of the earth. Science is left to ponder the question of how exactly we were created by God.

The true beauty of the creation accounts are diminished if we strip them from their ancient contexts and impose modern questions upon them they never intended to address. As Derek Kidner wrote in his commentary on Genesis, “The main point of Genesis 1 is about God. It is no accident that *God* is the subject of the first sentence of the Bible, for this word dominates the whole chapter and catches the eye at every point of the page: it is used some thirty-five times in as many verses of the story. The passage, indeed the Book, is about him first of all; to read it with any other primary interest (which is all too possible) is to misread it.”⁷ The Bible is not at all interested in the specifics of how God created the earth and the universe. The Bible is interested in teaching us correct theology about God amidst a polytheistic sea of rival suitors. It dumps them all on their heads and this is why the charge of lying is inapplicable. Bill T. Arnold captured the profound meaning of Genesis 1:1-3 in his commentary:

“We fail to appreciate the profundity of vv. 1–3 for two primary reasons, among several others. First, it is exceedingly familiar to those of us in the West, who still benefit from the long years of Judeo–Christian education and influence. Second, we have overemphasized the similarities between Gen 1 and the other ancient cosmogonies without fully appreciating the differences. This text soars above them in such a way as to deny *implicitly* any possibility of the theologies expressed in the Egyptian or Mesopotamian accounts. If we consider it an ideological polemic, we must admit it is not specifically so and only indirectly. It contains no theomachy, or cosmic conflict among the gods, or victory enthronement motif. Both are excluded by “in the beginning when God created . . . ”! Israel’s God has no rivals. There can be no struggle with forces opposed to his actions or corresponding to his power. There can be no victory enthronement motif because God’s victory was never in doubt; rather, God has never *not* been enthroned. There can be no enthronement portrait here because God has not *become* sovereign; he has simply never been *less than* sovereign.”⁸

Amen.

⁷ Derek Kidner, *Genesis an Introduction and Commentary*.

⁸ Bill Arnal, *Genesis New Cambridge Commentary*, pg 32