

# How Should We Read the Book of Genesis?

## Interviews With Dennis Gordon

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### Introduction

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The opinions expressed are those of the interviewees. We thank them for their time and their willingness to participate.

Please understand that when people speak, thoughts are not always put into well-formed sentences, and sometimes thoughts are not completed. In the following transcripts, we have removed occasional words that did not seem to contribute any meaning to the sentence. In a few cases we could not figure out what word was intended. We apologize for any transcription errors, and if you notice any, we welcome your assistance.

Our guest in these interviews is Dennis Gordon, who earned a PhD in zoology in 1973, and was ordained as a Christian minister in 1980. He works as a biologist in a government research organization in New Zealand, serves a GCI congregation in Wellington, and is an Associate

Member of the U.K.-based Society of Ordained Scientists. In this e-book we also include some articles that Dr. Gordon wrote for *Christian Odyssey* magazine.

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## **Creation, Evolution, and Genesis**

**J. Michael Fezell:** Dennis, it's a pleasure to have you here with us. It's been a long journey to get here from New Zealand through Orlando, through Germany, but we're glad you're here today. Would you mind beginning by telling us your story of how you became a Christian?

**Dennis Gordon:** I became a Christian at the age of 28 in Halifax, Nova Scotia. I was doing my doctorate there, and the year was 1973. In fact, I became a Christian in the same year that I got my doctorate. But what led up to that was that I caught the *World Tomorrow* broadcast on the local country-western radio station...not that I was interested in the music. In fact, one of the reasons that I listened to the program was so I didn't have to listen to country-western music. The program was interesting. I was biblically illiterate, and the broadcast raised a number of interesting questions, among which was origins. The fact that the view espoused in the program was an old-earth one as opposed to a young-earth one caught my interest because the young-earth controversy was quite alive and well back in 1973.

**JMF:** Well, as a parenthetical, tell us what young-earth and old-earth is all about.

**DG:** The young-earth idea is that the universe and planet earth are not more than 6,000 to 10,000 years old. That idea is taken from Genesis 1 according to a particular interpretation of what Genesis 1 is saying.

An old-earth view would acknowledge that the universe is as old as scientists say it is, but at the time, what was also presented was the "gap theory," that between Genesis 1:1 which is, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth," and the second verse which says, "And then the earth was without form and void," and the idea was that something happened between an original creation, which could be very old, and a re-creation, which might have happened only 7,000 to 10,000 years ago. So those were the two ideas. The fact that the program did not espouse a young-earth idea grabbed my attention. It had some credibility in my mind.

**JMF:** And so from there you became more involved with the church...

**DG:** Yes. I got listening to the broadcast on a regular basis over a period of a couple of

years and then I started writing to the church, to the Personal Correspondence Department, and received some answers that were quite well thought out. There was a “hook,” you might say. It turned out that God was calling me, and I responded to that. It became so compelling at one point that I simply couldn’t deny this...when God really reveals himself to you, there comes a point in time where you can’t deny that, where you simply have to respond and make a choice, and that’s what I did. So I was baptized on March 11, 1973. Haven’t looked back since.

**JMF:** And at that time you were in your doctoral studies.

**DG:** Yes.

**JMF:** Can you tell us about that trajectory? How you got into marine biology and how things progressed?

**DG:** I’ve always, ever since a child, been interested in nature. There’s something about the living environment that is beautiful and interesting and attractive, and it just draws you in. Not everybody necessarily is wired that way, but I was. I didn’t necessarily think that that would be my vocation in life. In fact, I always wanted from a young age to be a schoolteacher. I always wanted to teach. I ended up teaching, but not the way that I expected.

So I was drawn into that, and I went to university and I studied botany and I studied zoology, and I eventually majored in zoology and then I focused narrowly again into marine zoology and looked around for a place where I could do a doctorate, and it turned out to be Dalhousie University in Halifax, which is a very good school. They have a fantastic school of oceanography there, and that’s where I enrolled. I did my doctorate looking at the anatomy and aging process in a marine fouling invertebrate.

### **Considering evolution**

**JMF:** As you were going through that whole process of getting up to the point of narrowing down, working on your doctorate and so on, and before you began to read the Bible...had you ever had any thoughts about creation versus evolution, or it just hadn’t come up, or?

**DG:** Yes. I had had to think about that because in university, one is presented with an evolutionary viewpoint. That seemed perfectly rational and reasonable at the time. When I became interested in the church, when I was receiving the church’s literature, it presented a different viewpoint. But because God was calling me, and there’s a certain compulsion of that, you approach the Bible then with a certain respect, and if people are saying that the Bible says such and such, you have to take that on board and say maybe the evolutionary viewpoint that

I've been exposed to, maybe that wasn't altogether correct.

So, over the course of my 42 years as a research scientist (My first published paper was in 1968, when I was a master's student, so that was 42 years ago), I've been on both sides of this controversy. I went from believing in evolution, to being not really sure, to then disbelieving in evolution, to then reconsidering it again, because in the course of my career one of the things I started studying was fossils.

You can't study fossils for very long without having to consider the very hard questions. We don't have the luxury of ignoring the difficult questions. So I had to confront the issue, well, what is the fossil record telling me? In terms of my own expertise, as I specialize in a particular group of marine invertebrates which has a fantastic fossil record, so, as a consequence of that I had to confront the question, and then I began gradually more and more to see that the evidence for evolution was really quite compelling, and indisputable.

So then I had to then think, all right, if that's the case, what is then that telling me about God? And what then is that telling me about Genesis? I said, maybe people have been misreading Genesis. Of course, not everybody believes in a young-earth explanation. In fact, I find the minority believe in a young-earth explanation. The Roman Catholic Church, with nominally more than a billion members, officially believes in biological evolution. The same is true of the Anglican Church, officially. Young-earth creationism is currently very popular and has been for many decades now. So I really had to consider all of those issues. So, in fact, the world turned full circle, and I now fully believe in the reality of biological evolution. That does not one whit diminish God in my mind. As a matter of fact, it makes him bigger.

**JMF:** A lot of people, having to confront that question, are afraid to go there, as it were, because they're worried that somehow that would be undermining the account in Genesis 1 and Genesis 2, and that that might somehow cause an avalanche of, "Well, if I read Genesis that way, then where does it stop? Am I going to eventually throw out the whole Bible? Is that what you people are trying to get me to do?"

When you began to see that your assumptions about evolution when you became a Christian might need to be reconsidered, how did you approach Genesis? How did that affect your faith and how did you work through those passages?

**DG:** It didn't affect my faith at all, and it hasn't affected my faith. My faith has grown over the years because in the end my faith is in Jesus Christ, and one's faith and commitment to Jesus

is a consequence of the action of the Holy Spirit in one's life. That's where that comes from.

### **How should we read Genesis?**

In approaching Genesis, one has to ask the question, is there more than one way of reading Genesis? You know, maybe the young-earth creationists were not correct in this regard. It comes down to the point, why is it necessary to read Genesis 1 absolutely literally? Why can it not be read in some other kind of way?

There's nothing new about that concept — it's at least as old as Augustine, who said that we should be careful how we read the Bible lest we read into it, in fact, what is not there. He, at least, would say that an allegorical understanding is at least possible. So this is what people, I think, should at least consider — is an allegorical approach possible? Is there more than one way of reading Genesis 1, and ...

**JMF:** Some might wonder, what is an allegorical approach to reading something?

**DG:** It's a kind of figurative approach. In other words, is Genesis 1 written in such a way that it is communicating a spiritual truth in a non-literal way? In fact, that's exactly what it is doing.

**JMF:** Many would feel that if you don't read the Bible in a literal way, that you're watering down the message and you're not taking it seriously unless you read it literally. Can you comment on that?

**DG:** It really comes down to how we read the Bible in the first place. The Bible is a remarkable book written over more than a period of 1000 years by 40 different authors, and it constitutes many different forms of literature as well. When we read Genesis 1, we tend to read it superficially. We're completely unaware of the structure that's actually in the chapter. It really comes down to the whole issue of exegesis...

**JMF:** And exegesis is...

**DG:** Exegesis asks certain questions concerning the Bible. We want to know, for example, why a particular passage was written. What was the historical or cultural context? What was the setting? What were the issues? Who was the writer? Who was the audience? Why was it written? What was the point of it all? We really need to do our homework on that and address those questions. Once we see the context, it can shed a great deal of light on particular passages.

The same is true of Genesis 1. The context for the whole book of Genesis is the Exodus [of the Israelites out of Egypt]. If we really want to understand Genesis 1 or indeed the whole book

of Genesis, we have to read it in the light of the Exodus. That's the context. If we take Moses as the traditional author of the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible, and if he's writing this at the time when a people who were formerly in bondage to slavery are now in the process of being redeemed and on their way to salvation and the promised land, that's the context (much as our lives in terms of Christians are like that. We have been redeemed, and salvation for us is a process which will be fully realized at the return of Jesus Christ).

So the context for Genesis is the Exodus. We have a fledgling nation who are going into a land of promise, and God, through Moses, is giving them a future in relation to their present. *He's also giving them a past.* How do they come to be where they are? Much of which may have been retained, but some of which may have been forgotten through part of that slave population during the years of slavery and captivity. So that's the context.

Moses is connecting Israel with a past as well as giving them a future. If we ask, what is the context of Genesis in relation to their past... Genesis is divided into two major parts. The first 11 chapters deal with what we might call primeval history. A history that is largely based on oral traditions and things that Moses may have learned when he was taught in Egypt in an academic way, traditions that may have been communicated through the patriarchs. Remember, Abraham came out of Mesopotamia — that was his background, and there would have been traditions that came out of Mesopotamia that may have been transmitted down through his generations as well.

So what Moses does in relation to Genesis and connecting it to the Exodus is he gives them a past. He connects Israel with the ultimate origins — that the God whom they worship, the God of the Hebrews is the God who is the Creator. The reason for that is that the pagans worship all sorts of things in nature. In Egypt, there were gods of the sun and gods of darkness and gods for animals and vegetation and rivers and so on. The God of the Hebrews is the God who created all the things that the pagans worship. That's the chief point of Genesis 1, is to show that — that there is one God, that there are not many gods.

You could take the Flood story for example. Why is the Flood story in Genesis? The Flood story is a story of redemption and salvation. What Moses is doing in the Flood story is, he is reinforcing in the mind of the Israelites that their God is a God of redemption and salvation. Through the patriarchs, he is also reminding them that God is a God who is faithful to his covenant relationships. The promise that God made to Noah is faithful to that.

The Flood story, and I'm sort of digressing a little here, but the Flood story is a very

interesting story which is crafted very carefully and in a particular way. It's called a chiasm, where the elements of the story going into the middle of the story are exactly balanced and reversed by the elements going out of the story. Even in terms of the numbers in the Flood account — 7, 40, 150, 40, and 7. There's an exact balance.

When you look at the structure, you think, that's very interesting. Maybe there's an artificial structure in there which is being used to convey the story. In the middle of the Flood story, in the middle of that chiasm, is the line that says, "And God remembered Noah." That's the main point of the story. The hero of the Flood story is not Noah, it's God. Because God is a God who is faithful to his promises, and he is a God of redemption and salvation. So all of this is important for Israel in transitioning from where they were, to where they're going. Genesis has to be seen in that context.

### **A literary masterpiece**

**JMF:** So when we come to Genesis and begin to read the order day by day as things are being created, Genesis is not the only epic creation story from ancient times, and each of those have, as you said, multiple gods, multiple players who are involved, but this story in Genesis is unique in that there's one God and he's also the God of Israel, of course. And, each day the things that are listed that are created are the gods that you find in some of the other creation epics. That's allegorical and figurative, as opposed to literal.

**DG:** Yes. Genesis 1 actually is a superb piece of literature. Some scholars consider it a literary masterpiece. When you look at the detailed structure of Genesis 1, you can see that it is very carefully crafted. If you compare it to the pagan cosmogonies, their creation stories, Genesis 1 stands out in relation to those. The pagan cosmogonies are very complex and convoluted, and they include stories of chaos (usually a watery chaos) and darkness and sea monsters.

Genesis 1 uses some of the language of the pagan cosmogonies, drawing upon a common pool that people were familiar with, but recasting it to tell a proper theology about the God of Israel. Genesis 1 has a structure that most people don't even notice when they're reading over it, but it's one that Augustine noticed way back when he lived. Genesis 1 starts up, Genesis 1:1, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." And Genesis 2:1, at the end of that story says, "Thus the heavens and the earth were created." And in between those two verses is the account of that actual creation.

What was created on days one through six is the heavens and the earth. Exactly how does

that work out? Genesis 1:2 is very interesting, because then it says, “And the earth was without form and void” (in the Old King James Version of the Bible). Formless and empty – that’s the starting condition. It says, “And darkness was on the face of the deep.” Even before you have the creation of the six days, you have something that’s already existing, namely, a watery surface, and the Spirit of God is brooding over that. That’s your starting point.

It says specifically that it was **formless** and **empty**. Why is Moses writing that? He’s writing that because Moses wants to show that the God of the Hebrews, God of Israel, is able to **structure** the cosmos and then **populate** the cosmos. The first three days have to do with structuring. In fact, you can talk about the three separations. The word create, *bara*, which is something only God can do, is something used three times in Genesis 1. In the third time, it’s used three times in one verse.

On day one, God separates the light from the dark. On day two, he separates the waters above from the waters below, and on day three he separates the land from the waters. So we have the structuring. So what was formless, in Hebrew *tohu va bohu*, void and empty, so what was formless was now formed. So that solves that problem on the first three days.

What God then does in the second set of three days is solve the second problem, of emptiness, and then God populates each of the realms that he structured on the first three days. So on the first day we have the separation of day from night, and what do we populate that realm with, if not the sun and the moon and the stars? Then on day two we separate the waters above from the waters below, and what do we see populating those realms, but the birds in the upper atmosphere and the fish in the sea? Then on day six, the land animals and human beings populating that realm that was formed on day three, and that solves the problem of emptiness.

And so in that account, Moses is showing that the God of Israel is the God who is greater than all forces and life and everything. But incidentally, as you’ve pointed out, on each of those days Moses is taking elements that the pagans worship and showing that things that the pagans worship were, in fact, creations of the one true God. There’s a definite structure in there. We see that six plus one or, in fact, three plus three plus one framework, is just that, it’s a structural framework on which to hang that story.

### **A theological point**

**JMF:** So, in Genesis, the God of Israel is actually creating, structuring, and manipulating to his own pleasure everything that the pagan cosmogonies are holding up as gods — the still

water, the canopy of the sky, down to the crocodiles and everything that Egyptians worshiped, the rivers, the sweet waters, and all those things that become the gods of the ancient cosmogonies. It's really a very theological statement, a declaration, as opposed to some kind of scientific day-by-day "here's how God created"...

**DG:** [A scientific description] is not at all the point of it. The issue is polytheism, many gods, versus monotheism or one God. That's the issue. That was the issue for Israel, because when they were to come into the promised land and beyond. So many times we read in the Old Testament how the prophets lamented that the people of God kept whoring after other gods. It seems that they constantly had to be reminded that there was one God, the one true God of Israel, not a whole host of gods. It was an issue, a critical issue for them. In Genesis 1 God is establishing from the outset that the God of Israel is the Creator God. That's the issue, that's the context. Again, the Exodus is the context in which we read Genesis.

In the first 11 chapters and beyond, what else does Moses do? Well, there are lots of genealogies. The genealogies connect Israel with Adam, to show that they have an origination. And then Genesis 12-50, the larger part of the book of Genesis, deals with the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and then this fantastic story of Joseph and the 12 tribes of Israel, and that then takes you up to the Exodus story. That's what Moses is doing – he is making that connection from the beginning to the end. But again, it's set in the context of the Exodus. God is a God who is bringing about redemption and salvation, and he's the Creator God, what is more.

**JMF:** So you've got a declaration of who God is, you've got then a declaration of who Israel is in light of who God is, and that is all leading, of course, to the matrix from which the Messiah would come, and we move into John 1:1 and we find that behind all this all along, the Son of God himself is this Messiah who emerges out of Israel, whom God formed from the beginning, and the whole story adheres together in a way that you really can't see if you're focused on trying to make Genesis 1 a science book.

**DG:** Precisely. It does a grave disservice to Genesis to do that, because we're bringing in our own 21st-century issues and mindset and orientation, and imposing it in the Scripture or context where it doesn't belong. So, in fact, a young earth and insistence on a literal day-by-day interpretation does violence both to Scripture and to science. But in any case, going back to this whole issue of addressing monotheism versus polytheism in Genesis 1, in many ways it's actually quite amusing.

The Mesopotamian cosmogonies held the stars, or the deities associated with the stars, to be the highest of all deities. Next, the moon, and next, the sun. On day four in Genesis 1:16 we have this line, “And God created the greater light to rule by day and the lesser light to rule by night, and he made the stars too.” When you understand what’s going on, that’s actually a very amusing verse, because it deliberately reverses the importance of those divinities that’s in the pagan gods’ cosmologies. Instead of the stars being the most important deities in this pantheon, they’re presented in a throw-away line, oh and God made the stars, too. That’s fantastic — a deliberate insult...

**JMF:** An afterthought (both laughing).

**DG:** The main issue in Genesis 1 is who is God? Well, he’s the Creator of everything that the pagans worship. The God of Israel is the great Creator. The issue is, therefore, monotheism versus polytheism, one God versus many gods.

We can see that reflected in different verses. So, for example, in Genesis 1:16 we read that God made the greater light to rule by day and the lesser light to rule by night, and he made the stars, too. What is interesting about that is that that sequence of sun, moon, and stars deliberately reverses the popular ranking of the sun god and the moon god and the deities of the stars in the pagan cosmogonies, in Mesopotamia, for example, where the stars were the chief deities, and we see them reflected in the signs of the zodiac, for example, followed by the moon god and then the sun god, which was number three in that. Genesis 1:16 completely reverses that, which is intended to be, you might say, an insult.

But more than that, we may wonder, why did Moses use the expression “the greater light” and “the lesser light”? Why not just say “sun” and “moon”? Well, simply because the only existing names for sun and moon were deity names. So the last thing that Moses wanted to use was deity names, and reinforce the pagan concept. So he circumlocutes. He uses “the greater light” and “the lesser light.” It’s beautiful. It exactly fits this whole issue of who is God.

### **Genesis 2 and 3**

**JMF:** So Genesis 1 shows us who God is, who Israel is in relation to God, shows God creating and manipulating all those things that the pagan cosmogonies believed to be gods... Let’s move into Genesis 2. Here we have a fresh approach, so let’s talk about that.

**DG:** Well, Genesis 2 is interesting, and it comes in contradistinction to Genesis 1. In Genesis 1 we are presented with the sovereign Creator God of all that is. If that was the only

picture that we had of God, that would be good as far as it goes, but it would be an incomplete picture. You might think, well, how could one possibly have a relationship with *that* God?

Genesis 1 is a pastoral account. It has a different character and a different quality and different feel about it, so that in Genesis 2 we see that the God of Genesis 1 is, in fact, one with whom we *can* have a relationship. Even the name has changed. Whereas the God in Genesis 1 is Elohim, which is a plural word, which can imply the plural of majesty, elsewhere it's used for judges and so on, in Genesis 2 it's Yahweh Elohim, the Lord God, and this is one with whom we may have a relationship.

The relationships are established at three levels in Genesis 2. There's the human-God relationship, there the human-human relationship, and there's the human-rest of creation relationship. What we see in Genesis 3 is the breaking of all of those relationships. Then we see the consequence of the breaking of those relationships in Genesis 4 and beyond, leading up to the Flood in terms of the things that go wrong in people's lives, the violence that comes into the world, and so on.

Then we have the Flood account, and God essentially starts over again with one man. That's an interesting theme in its own right, when we consider what happened in Israel. Moses records that there came a point in Israel's history when God says, "Enough! I've had it with these people! I'll start all over again with you, Moses." There's a certain resonance there. That would be one reason why Moses actually includes some of this material. Again, we read this in the light of the Exodus.

**JMF:** In that case, Moses steps in as a messiah kind of figure and says, no.

**DG:** That's right.

**JMF:** And, of course, this is what God was looking for.

**DG:** He resists that temptation. If we go back just a little, one of the interesting aspects of Genesis 3, where we see the breaking down of all these relationships, in that chapter we see the beginning of the solution. It's known as the *protoevangelion*, or the first gospel. Genesis 3:15, where God says to the serpent, "Cursed are you above all creatures and you'll go on your belly all the days of your life and you'll eat dust." Now, do we take that as literal? Do serpents eat dust? Did that particular serpent eat dust? That was a symbol of abasement. So we have to read these things *symbolically* as what they refer to.

Then he says, "And there will be enmity [or hostility] between your seed and the seed of the

woman.” He said, “He [the seed of the woman], you will bruise his heel, but he will crush your head.” Many commentators see in that an anticipation of the future seed of the woman in terms of Jesus Christ, who will conquer Satan, conquer the devil. So in Genesis 3 we’re presented with a problem, but we’re also presented with the beginnings of a solution.

### **Genesis 4 through 11**

**JMF:** Then we move into Cain and Abel and the violence and so on, and then eventually we get to the Flood.

**DG:** Yes. So with Cain and Abel, Cain kills Abel, and God gives Eve another son, Seth, and then we see the development of two lines, you might say. There’s a righteous line and there’s an unrighteous line. This too is crafted very carefully in such a way that we see that the seventh from Adam via Cain is a man by the name of Lamech, who is incredibly violent and, you might say, symbolic of a particular attitude and orientation. But the seventh in the line from Seth is a man called Enoch, who is said to have walked with God. So we see these interesting parallels as well.

We also see the table of nations in Genesis 10. Why is that there? The table of nations, there are 70 nations which are mentioned. 70 is a symbolic number, 7 times 10. Many people have puzzled over the table of nations. Many scholars are puzzled over that because, it isn’t just a simple genealogy. The names that are mentioned there comprise the names of individuals, the names of tribes, also geographic place names. Once you’ve sorted all that out, it becomes very straightforward.

So what that does, what Moses is then doing in regard to Israel coming out of Egypt, is giving Israel a context in relationship to all of the surrounding nations with whom they have interacted and are going to interact. As far as we can tell from history, the names that are presented in Genesis 10 stretch at least as far westwards as Turkey, and Cyprus, and so on and down into northeastern Africa, Egypt, and Ethiopia, and then into Arabia, and over to Mesopotamia, and so on. That’s the world that is encompassed in that — just that very small world in relation to Israel.

Then we also come to Genesis 11, the story of the Tower of Babel, which is an interesting incident. The reason it is there is because it links with Genesis 12, which is the calling of Abraham. In Genesis 11 we read that all the people at that time spoke with one language, and they said to one another, “Let us build a city and a tower that reaches up to heaven and make a

name for ourselves.”

The significance of that is that when we come to Genesis 12, we see God talking to a man named Abram in Mesopotamia, a polytheistic society, and he says, “Come, go to a land that I will show you, and there *I* will make your name great.” So the tower-builders wanted to make a name for themselves, but God says to Abraham, “You obey me and I will make your name great.” That’s where true greatness comes from. The reason for mentioning the Tower of Babel is because it’s in contrast to this man called Abram, who will become Abraham.

The Babel story is interesting, too, in another aspect, because the tower that reaches onto heaven, we would understand that to be the ziggurat, those stepped towers that were built in Babylonia. They were not like pyramids, they were completely solid, a core of earth, which were bricked over with steps. At the top of the ziggurat was a small room with a table, and I think a bed, in some cases. The purpose of the ziggurat was not so human beings could ascend into heaven or be like God, but rather so the gods could come down and dwell among human beings. If they could build a tower which would go to heaven and bring whatever god down, it would make their name great. We see the contrast with how God would make Abraham’s name great.

The irony is that in a sense God did come down, God did come down for Jacob — remember the dream of Jacob’s ladder, where he saw angels ascending and descending. God has always said he wants to dwell with humanity. He wants to dwell with man. He wants to do that on his own terms. We can’t bring him down to dwell with us. God wants to dwell with us, but it must be on his terms. The tower-builders weren’t prepared to do it on God’s terms (not that they knew God). So we see these interesting contrasts going on. The reason why that’s mentioned in the context of Israel is because it links with the patriarchs.

## **Abraham**

**JMF:** So we have a very carefully-worded presentation from Genesis 1 all the way through Genesis 11 making a declaration about who God is in contrast to all the gods of the nations, making a declaration about who Israel is as they are emerging by being brought forth by God out of one context originating with Abraham who is redeemed himself from a world that’s at odds with God...

**DG:** That’s correct. And that *protoevangelion* that we read in Genesis 3:15...we’ve got the seed of the woman that will conquer the seed of the serpent and bring about redemption. We see that in Genesis 12: God talks to Abraham and says, “In your seed, all nations will be blessed.”

The apostle Paul in the New Testament says that the word for *seed* is singular — it's not seeds, and so *one* is in mind.

When we read the Bible not merely exegetically in context, which we should do, when we read it Christologically, we can see that, again, what the Holy Spirit had in mind and what we can now see in retrospect when God was talking to Abraham in that regard, he was talking about the son of man who would come, and in him all the nations of the world would be blessed. We see that gradually worked out in the life of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and how that family just started with one man, Abraham, and his faithfulness, and then it grew to be a family, and that family grew to be a nation. God's covenant faithfulness continued all through that relationship.

**JMF:** We see that faithfulness on God's part. Abraham is called the father of the faithful, but not because, necessarily, of *his* faithfulness, but because of God's faithfulness to him. We have specific stories to demonstrate the Abraham, or Abram, was not all that faithful at times, but God was faithful nonetheless, which is the whole story of Israel and redemption and of Christ's coming and so on.

**DG:** Absolutely. It's remarkable how that when we think about it, the hero of all of our stories, whether you're talking about the Flood story, whether you talk about the lives of the patriarchs, the hero is not Noah, it's not Abraham, Isaac, or Jacob; the hero is God, the faithful, covenant God who loves human beings in spite of their mistakes. In spite of the mistakes the patriarchs made, what is interesting, we never see God chiding them or chastising them.

**JMF:** He expects it (laughing).

**DG:** (laughing). We see that later with Israel, because Israel had this different kind of covenant, the Sinaitic covenant, which was a conditional relationship. But the relationship between God and Abraham was unconditional. It was certainly made unconditional when Abraham showed his willingness to sacrifice Isaac.

**JMF:** It's always interesting to me in Joshua how it's talking about the covenant, and then God says, "Now I know you're not going to keep this." It's like he knows already while they're saying, "We will keep it, we will keep it." "Well, I know you're not going to keep it, but here's what's going to happen."

### **Sin in the Garden of Eden**

**DG:** That's an interesting consideration, because it takes us right back to the Garden. Genesis 2 says that, "God planted a garden in Eden in the east, and in the garden he put the man

whom he had created.” The implication was that the man was not created in the garden, but wherever he was created, God then put him in the garden. It said that the garden had all these wonderful trees that one could eat the fruit of, but there were two trees that he couldn’t take the fruit of. We presume that it was in the garden where Adam did the naming of the animals, and this too is a relational act.

What is interesting about the garden is that it’s not a safe place. It’s not safe. We think of the garden — oh, what a desirable place that would be, but it’s not a safe place, because it’s got a serpent in it. The account doesn’t tell us where the serpent comes from; he just suddenly appears on the scene. “Now the serpent was the craftiest of all the creatures God had made. And he said to the woman, ‘Has God said thus and such?’”, which raises a lot of questions. You think, well, hang on a minute, why did God allow a serpent in this...

**JMF:** Why did he create crafty creatures?

**DG:** Exactly. When we read that Christ was slain from the foundation of the world, it’s very obvious that God knew which way Adam and Eve would jump. It was inevitable. We may see the serpent as, I think, a part of that process. God himself does not tempt. The scripture is quite explicit about that. So you might say, well, then why did he allow a serpent who could tempt?

When you think about it, I think one of the greatest gifts that God has given to us is this whole sense of responsibility and accountability. In other words, we are free moral agents. We are free to make choices in a way that animals by instinct cannot do. There’s something qualitatively different about human beings as compared to the rest of creation. I think we can view the serpent in the garden in a funny sort of way, you might say, as a facilitator, as a catalyst for the gift that God is giving to humanity, which is...he is gifting us with the freedom to choose, he’s gifting us with the freedom to be autonomous beings. That’s an amazing thing. No other creature has had that.

**JMF:** You’ve been a minister of the gospel for 30 years and preaching, counseling, all the things that ministers do, and you’ve been a marine biologist all that time as well. You’ve recognized that Genesis has nothing to do with a scientific description of creation, but it’s about the identity of God, the identity of Israel, and the history of salvation. Are there other scientists who see creation and evolution as being consistent with Christian faith?

**DG:** I would say that the majority view among scientists who are Christians would be that biological evolution is a reality. We don’t have the luxury of ignoring the hard questions. We

have had to confront these issues in our scientific lives. For example, if we take evolution, many people have been taught to regard the concept of evolution as fundamentally evil and necessarily atheistic. They've been taught that viewpoint without ever having really been taught what evolution *is*, what it represents, what it might actually tell us about God.

I think the more fruitful way, certainly the more honest way, is to say, all right, let's look at the message of creation. What is the overwhelming message that it's communicating to us? When we scrutinize the creation, when we look at genetics, when we look at paleontology, the fossil record, when we look at the relatedness between all the kingdoms of life, all of life is related, from bacteria to human beings, there is a genetic continuity. There is not a discontinuity; all of life is related. I think that is very important. It links with our understanding of the Triune God who is wholly relational. Everything in the universe is fundamentally relational. There is nothing in creation that is so inert that it cannot be subject to some force or enter into some kind of chemical reaction so that everything in nature, everything in creation, is relational.

### **“Keeping” the Garden**

**JMF:** Which is exactly what our other program, *You're Included*, is all about — the fact that God is relational — Father, Son, and Holy Spirit — and has created human beings to be relational with him in Christ and with one another.

**DG:** This is absolutely the case. Sadly, it's one of the things that we miss and completely overlook when we're reading the early chapters of Genesis. Coming back to the Garden, God commands Adam to dress and to keep the trees and the other things in the garden. The word to dress is the Hebrew verb *abad*, and it is the same verb that is used of the priests in their service, and it can also mean to serve, as in temple service, as in worship service.

The word “to keep” means “to have very careful regard for.” So what God is actually saying to Adam is, this is not just merely an agricultural invitation. What he is saying is, what we understand God to be saying is, that “You are my co-regent on earth. You are my steward. You are a steward over my creation.”

What did he say to Adam and Eve? He said, “You shall have dominion,” which means sovereignty and it means rulership, but it doesn't mean the kind of dominion that has been exhibited by human beings. It's doesn't mean repressive and controlling and corrupting and manipulative and exploitative. No, it means completely the opposite. It means, you shall have regard for my creation. I am the sovereign Creator, and I want you to treat my creation with all

the due respect that I have for it and the love that I have for it.

So the command for Adam in the garden was that he would essentially be God's priest for the rest of creation. And then in terms of relationship, what we see is that we as human beings are created with a priestly role in terms of our relationship to the creation, and also giving voice to the creation in our worship of God. We read in the Psalms these wonderful poetic images of mountains bowing down and trees clapping hands in worship of God. Well, of course, they can't do that. Mountains can't bow, and trees can't clap their hands, but *we* can. We can give voice to all of creation and bring them into that worship of God, treating it in the way that God intended from the outset.

When we look at the history of humanity on earth, it's been an unmitigated disaster. In fact, we're making the planet a very bad place for living things. Our track record is appalling. But Jesus Christ, when he came, because he entered into our humanity, he brings our humanity into the triune relationship with God. Not only does he bring our humanity into that relationship by being human and by fulfilling the role that Adam failed to do, he also embraces the rest of creation and gives voice to creation in terms of the worship of the creation to the Father. It's a beautiful relational picture.

**JMF:** How do we find the right balance on how we treat the creation and how we use it? In other words, you have a range of people from what some derogatorily call tree-huggers all the way up to those who in complete blatant disregard, plow down everything and burn it all up in order to make a few dollars. Where's the balance for us as individuals?

**DG:** Let me give the example of a couple of Scriptures. There's one in 2 Peter 2:12, where it just mentions in passing that animals were created to be destroyed. We see the command of God to Israel that they could sacrifice animals and so on, and we eat animals for food. Jesus did the same thing. That's one way of using nature, but we don't have to do that in an exploitative way. So on the other side of the equation, there is a proverb that says, "The righteous man has regard for the life of his beast." In other words, if we're a farmer or animal husbandry specialist or so, we've got to consider the fact that these are living creatures. They experience pain, they thrive in an environment which is conducive to their well-being, and so on.

So the balance that you asked about is that we are able to use creation in a certain way, but we do it in a way that doesn't abuse the creation or cause excessive harm to the creation. We can see, too, the way that things naturally operate in the creation. For example, there are predator-

prey relationships in the creation. There are parasite relationships in the creation. Some people would say, “Well, they don’t belong there.” I think, well, why do they not belong there? 1 Timothy 4:4 says that “everything that God created is good.”

In the Genesis account on each day it says, “And God said, this is good.” The reason why on each of those days God says, “This is good, this is good, this is good, this is good” is because when he comes to humans he says, “This is *very* good,” because that was the end point. To make that contrast is very useful, to say about all the other things that these are good, in order to highlight the fact that with humans this is *very* good, because we have that role of humans, to be priests for the rest of creation.

### **The freedom to change**

**JMF:** So relationships are at the foundation level of everything that exists.

**DG:** Absolutely. It’s fascinating that modern biologists refer to what they call as the Tree of Life. When we as Christians think about the Tree of Life, we think of the Tree of Life in the Garden of Eden, which if Adam would have taken the fruit, he could live forever. Biologists today talk about the Tree of Life to talk about the genetic interrelatedness and connectedness of all living things from bacteria to human beings — that we are all genetically related. The reason why we’re all genetically related — animals, plants, bacteria, fungi, protozoans, and so on is because of this process of biological evolution.

Many people, as I’ve mentioned, have been taught to regard that concept as necessarily evil and atheistic. But when you explore what it is, it is not disharmonious with anything that is presented in Genesis 1. In fact, when we think about God’s relationship to the creation, it makes a great deal of sense. It’s interesting how genealogies feature so prominently in the Bible. When we’re talking about the relationship between all of life, what we’re talking about is just one extended genealogy. Doesn’t that make much more sense?

We have to think about, you know, what is it that we’re objecting to when we’re objecting to evolution? It isn’t necessarily atheistic. Why should it be necessarily atheistic? Is God any less God if he has created a process which is so extraordinarily creative when in fact things in creation have the freedom to be and to become? Colossians 1 tells us that nothing happens on a moment-by-moment basis except that God is upholding it and sustaining it on a moment-by-moment basis. So if we think of life as, in a sense, unfolding or unrolling or progressing through time, it’s only because the Holy Spirit is enabling it.

We could say that the whole process of evolution is a description of God's creation, is a description of God's method of creation. But in looking at it, it appears that God is not pulling the strings at every point in that process. In other words, there's a certain freedom that's allowed in that. Is that consistent with what we know about God? I'm impressed by what Paul tells us in Philippians — how that Christ emptied himself of his divinity, it's called *kenosis*, the self-emptying quality of God, who in this great condescension (which means descent to be with) becomes human, fully human, as we are, and enters into our humanity.

And then being human, he interacts with human beings in the most loving and friendly way...so that on one occasion, Matthew 20, when the disciples are arguing amongst themselves over who will have certain positions in the kingdom, Jesus said, "You know how the rulers of the gentile world just lord it over people?" We see plenty of examples of that in today's world. We see rulers who are brutal and controlling and manipulative and so on. And Jesus said to the disciples, "It shall not be that way with you."

When we think about Jesus as the head of the church, can we say that Jesus has been controlling? We would acknowledge that he's in control, but the last thing we would say of God is that he is controlling. We can't think of God as the master puppeteer of the universe who pulls every string. We can't think of him as the master manipulator who ensures every outcome at every moment. That is a picture of Caesar. That's how Caesar does things.

**JMF:** It's not a picture of love, is it?

**DG:** It's not a picture of love.

**JMF:** Love is freely given, freely received, it can't be pushed or forced. It lies at the heart of everything — everything God is and God does requires freedom.

**DG:** Yes. When we see the way Jesus interacted with the disciples, the whole way was completely loving. We see nothing about Jesus that is manipulative, even though he was in control, it would appear, of every circumstance, even right up to and including the crucifixion, which is amazing. But how God does that, that's one of the great mysteries.

### **Creating a process**

**JMF:** It seems as though most Christians who think of evolution as being the polar opposite of faith have never thought in terms of the possibility that God could create evolution as a process and use it — that it's not our idea or our evolution that we come up with, it's a discovery and recognition of a process God created, much as like we would discover anything else. God is

creator of all, we all believe that as Christians, and is it such a reach to be able to say, “and whatever processes there are, including evolution, God is the author of those”?

**DG:** He’s the author of that. It doesn’t make God any less of a creator if this is a process that he used. But when we come back to the point of relationality... how else do we envision God as creator? Do we envision God as perhaps an assembly-line worker turning out widgets...and so he’s making this species and this species, this species and this species, all unrelated to each other?

The beauty of evolution is that all the species co-evolve. In other words, they’re evolving in interrelationship with each other through time in a particular environmental setting. So it’s constant interaction, interrelationship, the whole time. They’re co-evolving. It’s a beautiful picture of interrelatedness and interconnectedness, which magnifies my view of how God does things as opposed to being a master manipulator, controlling puppeteer, making widgets on a factory assembly line.

Another aspect of evolution that’s also worth considering is that in the young-earth model where this is denied, we have a picture presented to us, say in the Flood story, or at least one explanation of the Flood, that at the time of Noah the whole world was covered in water and on the ark were representatives of all the different life that we see, including as biologists would regard it and geologists, all the life right back through time.

To a young-earth creationist, it wasn’t right back through time. They all existed in the Garden of Eden or on planet earth, and at some point representatives found their way on the ark, and then when the ark landed, we find that there was these pairs that then underwent amazingly rapid evolutionary changes in order to produce all these different kinds of forms that we find in the fossil record.

The irony of that is that that would require much greater and faster rates of evolution on the part of the young-earth creationists than scientists have ever called for. Impossible rates of evolution to produce all of that. So there’s a bit of a disconnect between what they would be saying and for what we actually see in nature, what the creation is actually telling us.

I think it was Francis Bacon who made the distinction or coined the idea of God’s two books — there’s the book of the *word* and the book of his *works*. If it is impossible for God to lie, he’s not going to lie in the Scriptures. Some things will be presented allegorically in a way of conveying truth...the truth is the important thing, the meaning is the thing. But also in the

creation, when we read the creation, it's giving a particular message. Is God lying in that message? Is the earth not as old as what it's telling us it is?

Young-earth creationism insists that Genesis 1 can only be read or interpreted absolutely as a literal historical account. That's one thing. That is a fundamental premise upon which rests a whole lot of other premises that derive from that. It also insists, for example, that Genesis 1, if we take it literally and if every word is true, then that has implications for a scientific understanding as well. Young-earthers would read into Genesis 1 scientific statements as well as the theological ones, and even historical statements, too. We really must question whether that fundamental premise is true. Is it exegetically correct? Is it being read in context?

### **Not a science text**

**JMF:** In other words, it isn't there as a science text, or to tell us how God created, or as even a history lesson, it's there as a theological statement about who God is and who Israel is.

**DG:** Exactly. That's the point. To insist that Genesis 1 is a scientific statement is to fall into the trap of assuming that all truth is scientific truth, and it is according or giving to science a greater role or responsibility than science actually has. Science really doesn't belong in the context of Genesis 1.

What we can say about the relationship of science to Genesis 1 is that it orientated us, it orientated human beings in such a way by saying that God is the creator of all that exists, and God is comprehensible. Not in the way that the pagan gods were incomprehensible, in fact, nobody could understand them, they were capricious (though they were capricious because they didn't exist, except in people's imaginations). But the Creator God made an orderly creation that is amenable to investigation.

With that orientation, that we're no longer subject to the whims of other gods, of volcanoes and tsunamis and events, and we had to appease them through some kind of priesthood, that liberated us. Monotheism was an extraordinarily liberating concept. The moment we understood that God was the God of creation amenable to investigation, that set the scene for the possibility of the modern scientific enterprise, which sprang out of that. It was one of the great gifts of monotheism.

In terms of other tenets of young-earth creationism, one is that there was no death before Adam. One of the arguments for that is something that Paul writes in Romans 5:12, where it says that "Just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death

came to all people because all sinned.” They would say from this that sin entered the world through one man and death entered the world at that same time.

But it’s a very careless reading of the verse, because it says, “Sin entered the world through one man.” The word for “world” here is the word *kosmos*, which really refers to the world of **human** affairs, the world that is important to us humans, in which we operate. So sin entered *that* world – the world of humanity, the world of human affairs, and death came to humanity as a consequence of that. That’s what it says.

It says, “In this way, death came to…” animals and plants? No. It says, “Death came to all people (or all men, as it says in the King James Version), because all sinned.” To read into this statement by saying that there was no death at all before Adam, frankly, doesn’t at all accord with Genesis, and it’s a misreading of Romans 5:12.

**JMF:** So the idea of trying to use Genesis, or trying to bring science into Genesis to construct some sort of a scientific defense of Genesis 1, is to misunderstand the point of Genesis 1 and what it’s accomplishing and what it’s trying to do. It isn’t about science — it’s entirely a theological statement, as we said before.

**DG:** Exactly. As we said previously, we read Genesis in the context of the Exodus. Why is Moses even telling the story of Genesis? It’s about Israel’s God.

### **Intelligent Design**

**JMF:** So does it make sense to try to bring science to the table to prove God exists?

**DG:** Well, that’s what “intelligent designers” seek to do. Is it possible that we can point to anything in the physical, material creation to prove the existence of God who is spirit?

**JMF:** This is the idea behind “intelligent design”?

**DG:** The fundamental idea behind intelligent design is that life in the universe is so complex and so amazing and magnificent that they must have been designed. But if we use the criteria of design or complexity to say that there must be a God, that introduces philosophical and theological problems. So, to come back to the point, it is possible for anything that is material and physical to prove the existence of God who is spiritual? I would say no, that’s not possible at all. It’s logically problematic, it’s philosophically problematic, it’s also theologically problematic.

Jesus, in John 4, said that God is spirit, and that those who worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth. Many people in the past have sought to prove the existence of God through the

existence of design, the existence of law, the existence of the created order. All of these things would constitute powerful circumstantial evidence, and certainly are consistent with the existence of God (not that they would necessarily tell us much about the God of Christians). But can they constitute a knock-down or formal proof? The answer is no, they cannot.

So if anybody asks me as a scientist why I believe... whereas in the earlier years, I might have been tempted to point to the creation and so on. The answer I would now give is the reason why I believe is because God has gifted me to believe.

What do I mean by that? It builds on what Jesus said — that God is spirit and those who worship him must worship him as spirit. Paul, in Corinthians 3, says that no one can affirm or assert that Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit. In other words, my certainty comes through the Holy Spirit. That is what is the foundation of my faith.

It's similar to what Matthew records as well, when Jesus came to the disciples and said, "Who do people say that I am?" Some said, John the Baptist, or Elijah, or a prophet and so on. "But who do you say that I am?" He asked the question quite deliberately. Peter answers, "You are the son of the living God," and Jesus said, "Blessed are you Simon Bar-jona, for flesh and blood did not reveal that to you, but my Father in heaven."

Any of us who are Christians, the reason why we believe, if we think about it, is simply because God has gifted us to believe in Christ through the Spirit, and that's the reason why. That is the fundamental reason why we believe. All the other things like the creation and so on, they're ancillary to the belief, but they cannot constitute a formal knock-down proof.

In Romans 1:20, Paul says something along the lines that: "For what may be known about God, the invisible things that may be known of God are clearly seen by the things that are made, mainly his power and his divinity. Therefore, people are without excuse." People look at this verse and say, the creation of the world therefore proves the existence of God.

But again, we have to read very clearly what Paul has said. It's very interesting what he says. He says, "For since the creation of the world [that's since or "from"] that which is invisible can be seen." It sounds like a contradiction in terms. What is it about God that is invisible that can be seen from the creation? Paul mentions just two things: his power and his divinity.

We would agree that that would be appropriate evidence of God. Deity and power. But it's an ambiguous message, and it certainly doesn't tell us an awful lot about the God of Jesus Christ. It simply tells us that there ought to be some kind of power or deity behind the creation. But

beyond that, it doesn't take us very far. What we may understand about the creation is fundamentally relational, and what we talked about before, we do that by examining the life and the attributes of Jesus Christ.

**JMF:** So how would you respond to somebody who felt that intelligent design proved God's existence?

**DG:** I would say that intelligent design cannot and does not prove God's existence. Intelligent designers would say, there are some things that are irreducibly complex. They're so complex that you cannot simplify them any further, and there's no way they could have evolved from something simpler. That argument has been overturned many times by different people in the literature. That's one issue.

But invoking God to explain the presently unexplainable explains nothing. It's a little bit like the God of the gaps — "We don't know how this or that could have developed or could have evolved; God must have done it." At that point all scientific inquiry stops. As a matter of fact, it's not very helpful, and it really explains nothing at all. It's not helpful in that regard.

But as I've said, how can we prove God? How can we prove him? How can we know him? Only spiritually and relationally. That's the knock-down proof. That's the fundamental proof, and it's something that God gifts us with. If we insist that something in creation or the creation itself proves the existence of God, so that a creationist may say to an atheist, "There, you see, this is the proof of God..." where is faith, what place is there for faith? Because they've been looking for something concrete to prove God, but we're not going to find something concrete to prove God. It is what has been gifted to us through the Spirit, which is the gift of faith, and that's what constitutes our proof.

### **What are we afraid of?**

**JMF:** There seems to be a fear or a need to defend the Bible, especially Genesis 1, against liberalism or a watering-down of taking the Bible seriously. If somebody is willing to say that Genesis 1 should not be read as a literal creation, but in the way that we've been discussing...so there's a sense of needing to defend the Bible from some kind of scientific perspective such as is evidenced in the creationism museum in northern Kentucky.

**DG:** Fear is never a good starting point for anything. The Bible doesn't need defending from us. We are called to be apologists for the Bible (and the word *apologist* comes from a Greek word meaning to give a defense). We give a defense from that point of view, but...

Let's take the argument that if we insist that Genesis 1 is literal, historical truth, we arrive at some problems right away. For example, take the account of the creation on the second day, where it says that God created a "firmament" (in the Old King James) to separate the waters above from the waters below.

The Hebrew word for "firmament" (and the word is variously translated — it's called sky, or it's called space, or it's called vault)... the Hebrew word that is used is the word *raqia*, and the root of that word means something which is beaten and hammered flat, like a sheet of metal. In the Latin Vulgate, the word is translated as *firmamentum*, and the root of that that's built into that word is the meaning of *firm*. So the firmament that is pictured in Genesis 1 is something *solid*.

The concept of the ancients was that the earth was flat and it was circular and that there was above it, like an upturned bowl, this solid dome across the globe meeting the world at the perimeter. There were holes in it to let the waters down because above the firmament (in which were set the sun, moon, and stars) above the sun, moon, and stars, above the firmament, was the waters above [cf. Gen. 1:7 and 7:11]. The waters above would come through holes in the firmament to water the earth.

We know that that is scientifically not true. So if we insist that Genesis 1 is literally true, is that the cosmology that we're going to use? Or do we understand that Moses is simply using an existing cosmological concept in order to convey an eternal spiritual truth concerning the God of Israel?

**JMF:** So it isn't a question of saying Genesis 1 is not true, it's a question of understanding what the truth in Genesis 1 is.

**DG:** Right.

### **Literal foolishness**

**JMF:** There's no question in any case with the Bible about its truth. That seems to be another sticking point oftentimes, is the idea of a literal reading of any part of the Bible is true, and a figurative reading of anything is not true. But nothing could be further from the truth.

**DG:** That's correct. Why is there this insistence that we can only read it literally? As we mentioned previously, there are many things in the Bible which are figurative. Christ used parables, for example, which in themselves were not necessarily true accounts or stories, but he's using the story or using the parable to convey a truth.

The book of Revelation, for example, is exceedingly symbolic. Are we going to insist that we read that equally literally? The Bible, interestingly, ends as it begins, symbolically. Symbolism is a valid vehicle to communicate truth. In fact, it's probably the simplest way to communicate it.

Why would God, why would the Holy Spirit 3000 years ago try and educate Moses to something which is of concern to *our* generation in order to convey a timeless truth? As it is, the way Genesis 1 is written, which is a brilliantly constructed account, is timeless. It cuts across all cultures and all times and is relevant at all levels, it's applicable at all levels, and it's amenable at all levels. To insist that it is a westernized scientific viewpoint is to misunderstand it completely.

**JMF:** How does this literalistic approach to trying to understand Genesis affect evangelism?

**DG:** It affects it profoundly. It constitutes a major stumbling block to the evangelization of scientifically literate people, because the assumption is that if a six-day, a 6000-year-old earth is true, then nothing else in the Bible is reliable. Young-earth creationism in the minds of certainly all the people I know in my scientific institution, just makes the Bible a joke. It has absolutely no credibility whatsoever.

**JMF:** That's exactly the opposite of what the young-earth folks are trying to do. They are trying to defend Genesis 1 *as* science in order to make it all seem, or to save it all from being rejected. But the effect is exactly the opposite.

**DG:** The effect is exactly the opposite. Scientifically it's indefensible. The Flood model, for example again, is scientifically indefensible. To account for a whole fossil record through the Noachian Flood is foolishness.

**JMF:** So again, to read the Bible as though it's trying to present a scientific perspective is to misunderstand it, to misuse it, and therefore to give it a bad name which it doesn't deserve.

**DG:** It absolutely does give it a bad name. But the worst thing of all is if the Bible has no credibility, as the consequence of the insistence of the young-earth viewpoint, then it makes it very hard for people to believe in Jesus Christ, for example. How can they have confidence in the message of the gospel and the Gospel accounts of Jesus? We say that the Bible is the word of God. Well, if the Bible is the word of God and Genesis 1 has to be taken literally, well, most scientists are not going to do that. It's an impossibility to take that literally. And that does color their whole attitude toward the rest of the Bible, which is a profound and tragic consequence.

**JMF:** Someone who does take this young-earth perspective, though, would no doubt want to

argue that all you're doing is trying to placate or appease your scientific friends, so you've created a non-scientific view in calling it figurative and so on, just to make it palatable to the scientific community. How would you respond to that?

**DG:** I can see why some people might level that accusation. But is it a true accusation, that one really ought to turn a questioner back on his head and say, "Why do you insist that it can only be taken literally? Have you done your exegesis? Have you read it in context?"

More, and this is the thing that truly puzzles me, if you read the scholarly commentaries (and I'm talking about the Word Bible Commentary, the New International Commentary on the Old Testament, and a whole host of commentaries) they are unanimous in their approach concerning how to read Genesis 1 and how to interpret this. This is not just my idea that we're dealing with something which is allegorical or symbolic or that is set in the context of the rest of the Pentateuch and has the Exodus context. This is not my idea. This is well-known and well-understood among bona-fide Christian scholars.

Why then should a minority view, which it is, of young-earth creationism, and which is not accepted by the major denominations that exist in the world, why should they insist that their viewpoint is the only correct one? In fact I say the onus of proof is based on them.

I have actually written an article on Genesis 1 based on the scholarly commentaries and a proper exegesis. I wrote it for a magazine called *New Zealand Science Teacher*. They had a whole issue devoted to the subject of evolution. This was in September 2007. The editor invited me to write an article about evolution, which I could have done, but actually there were other people who could do a much better job.

I said, actually, I would prefer to write something else, and I submitted an article based on showing exactly what Genesis 1 was all about. It was monotheism versus polytheism and comparing it with the ancient cosmogonies and showing from the internal structure of the chapter, you know, the first three days of separation and structuring the cosmos and then the second three days of populating and solving the problem of *tohu va bohu* and so on.

I have sent that to a number of my scientific colleagues, and they have come back and they have said, "That makes real sense." It's broken down the barrier that was existent in their mind which had been erected by young-earth creationism, and now puts them in a position where they're now amenable to considering the rest of the Bible as having credibility. But as it is, there is this major wall, this major stumbling block, and that's what it is.

Paul says in Corinthians, “Now is a day of salvation and we place no stumbling block before men lest our ministry be discredited.” [2 Corinthians 6:2-3] But young-earth creationists have erected a major stumbling block. Paul also said, “Let us be all things to all men so that by any means we might save some.” [1 Corinthians 9:19] But they’re not willing to say, well, maybe there is another way of looking at it.

### **The creationist museum**

**JMF:** At the young-earth or the creationist museum in Kentucky, toward the end of the tour...they have plaques, you know, explaining the various concepts as you go...and toward the end, they put forward an argument that there is a strong difference between natural selection and evolution, and they use natural selection as the basis for trying to explain the diversity of species, and yet they want to argue that that is completely different from evolution. Can you comment on that?

**DG:** I visited the creation museum three years ago, and I saw exactly the information that you are referring to. At least one of them that I remember was talking about that on the ark, God had maybe some basic pairs of basic kinds... *baramin*, created kinds...and that from those pairs after the Flood then differentiated all the many different kinds represented from that basic kind.

The particular example I remember was the rhinoceros family, *Rhinocerotidae*. What they’re arguing is that after the Flood...and they showed what was one would normally look at and say, that’s an evolutionary tree. In that evolutionary tree, in the very short period of time after the Flood, was more evolution than any evolutionary biologist has ever suggested would be possible. So it seems to me that the young-earth creationists want to have their cake and eat it too. They’re saying on the one hand that evolution is not possible, but on the other they’re saying that the differentiation of these basic kinds after the Flood achieved far greater speeds and degrees of evolution that leave you amazed. It’s just not possible.

**JMF:** It struck me the same way. It’s an attempt to explain exactly what evolution does explain, only rejecting evolution while trying to do it.

**DG:** Yeah. It’s most curious.

**JMF:** What kind of responses have there been to counter the negative effects in terms of evangelism?

**DG:** One of the more outstanding ones was begun right here in the United States by Dr. Michael Zimmerman of Butler University in Indiana. It’s called the Clergy Letter Project, and

currently some 12,600 U.S. Clergy have signed a statement affirming the reality of biological evolution.

One of the things they do is educate their congregations concerning this and concerning the implications of what it may tell us about God, as a way of combating the stumbling block that young-earth creationism has created. Many rabbis have signed up to this as well. Some whole denominations have affirmed it, and there are scientific consultants in 30 different countries who have agreed to help clergy in understanding the issues and to make progress in this area.

**JMF:** Can anyone read that material or see a copy of...

**DG:** It's all online. So if one just googles "Clergy Letter Project," it's all right there.

[[www.theclergyletterproject.org/](http://www.theclergyletterproject.org/)]

**JMF:** We've come to the end of our time, and I want to thank you again for joining us today and appreciate very much the time we've been able to spend together.

**DG:** Thank you, Mike. I've appreciated the opportunity very much.

**JMF:** Thank you.

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## **No Contest - Why the Argument Over Genesis?**

One doesn't have to be religious to know that a great controversy surrounds the first chapter in the Bible. The way it is written seems to suggest that the whole universe, including the Earth and all life, was made by God in just six days. Some Protestant Christians insist on taking this literally. Genealogies in succeeding chapters are then supposed to lead us to the conclusion that all this happened 10,000 years ago, more or less.

This creationist viewpoint has been forcefully asserted, especially during the latter part of the 20th century, and the media have been very effective in reporting it. There is, therefore, a general sense among the biblically illiterate general public (and even many Christians) that the majority of Christians have always held such a view. This is not the case.

According to Conrad Hyers, author of *The Meaning of Creation*, allegorical interpretations of Genesis 1 were common in the Patristic (early) and Medieval Church, whereas Protestant Reformers leaned toward a literal approach. Martin Luther, for example, criticized Augustine (A.D. 354–430) for Augustine's allegorical interpretation of the six days of Creation.

Today, there are numerous religious books about the Genesis Creation written by evangelical or fundamentalist scientists who ridicule evolution and rewrite geological history, meanwhile demanding that the Genesis accounts can be interpreted only and wholly literally. Wedded to a particular paradigm, they fail to consider carefully what type of literature it is, why it was written, who the audience was, and what were the historical/cultural and religious settings in which Genesis was written.

The fact is, a literal interpretation of Genesis 1 has nothing to do with science, and it is poor theology to suggest it does. “Young earth” creationists have overlooked the first principles of exegesis. Exegesis is the systematic study of Scripture to discover the original, intended meaning.

#### **Translation of the fifth tablet of the *Enuma Elish***

Compare the order of deities with that of the celestial bodies in Genesis 1:16, in which the order is deliberately reversed.

*He [Marduk] made the stations for the great gods; The stars, their images, as the stars of the Zodiac, he fixed. He ordained the year and into sections he divided it; For the twelve months he fixed three stars. The Moon-god he caused to shine forth, the night he entrusted to him. He appointed him, a being of the night, to determine the days; Every month without ceasing with the crown he covered him, saying: “At the beginning of the month, when thou shinest upon the land, Thou commandest the horns to determine six days, And on the seventh day to divide the crown.” When the Sun-god on the foundation of heaven... thee, ... [tablet here damaged]*

When exegesis is done properly, Genesis 1 is seen for what it is — a literary masterpiece, an intelligent, carefully crafted assertion of monotheism against polytheism (many gods), a matter of great significance for the people who were alive when Genesis 1 was written. Many chapters of the Old Testament record how the people of Israel preferred to “go whoring after other gods” than follow the one true God.

#### **Cosmogony or cosmology?**

Moses wrote the Creation account as a cosmogony that was intended to counter the well-known cosmogonies of the pagans.<sup>1</sup>

A cosmogony is a story of the genesis or development of the universe and the creation of the

world, whereas cosmology is strictly a formal branch of philosophy dealing with the origin and general structure of the universe. We know what the commonest pagan cosmogonies were because they are preserved in cuneiform script on clay tablets.

The best-known cosmogony, the famous Babylonian creation epic known as the *Enuma Elish*, itself based on earlier, pre-Mosaic versions, was written some time after Moses. When you read a translation of it (see above), you can see what the Israelites were up against. It describes a struggle between cosmic order and cosmic chaos. There are great sea monsters, and the chief divinities, in order of pre-eminence, are the stars, the moon, and the sun. Other gods abound in the cosmogonies — gods of darkness, water, vegetation, various animals, and so on.

The *Enuma Elish* and earlier cosmogonies help us understand why the Genesis account is written as it is. As one archaeologist has written, Genesis freely uses the metaphors and symbolism drawn from a common cultural pool to assert its own theology about God.

### **In the beginning...**

Let's now look at the structure of Genesis 1 to see how this works (for this you might want to consult a Bible). It starts out with a summary statement: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth [the universe]."

Most of the verses in the chapter hinge upon the next statement, in verse 2: "The earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep." The following verses explain how God respectively structured and "filled" the conditions of formlessness and emptiness. The six days are arranged in two parallel sets of three (noted as early as Augustine in his *City of God*), such that what is created on days four through six populates the appropriate realm structured in days one through three.

| Problem               | Preparation                                                                                   | Population                                                         |
|-----------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Verse 2               | Days 1-3                                                                                      | Days 4-6                                                           |
| darkness              | day 1a - creation of light (day)<br>day 1b - separation from darkness (night)                 | day 4a - creation of sun<br>day 4b - creation of moon and stars    |
| watery abyss          | day 2a - creation of firmament (sky)<br>day 2b - separation of waters above from waters below | day 5a - creation of birds<br>days 5b - creation of fish           |
| formless earth        | day 3a - separation of earth from sea<br>day 3b - creation of vegetation                      | day 6a - creation of land animals<br>day 6b - creation of humanity |
| without form and void | <i>tohu</i> (formlessness) is formed                                                          | <i>bohu</i> (the void) is filled                                   |

The point of this symmetry in Genesis 1 is that the form of the presentation is at least as important as the content. With this perspective, it is clear that the structural framework is artificial and therefore was never intended by the author to be taken literally as a seven-day historical account (with God resting on the seventh day). The fact of God’s creative authority over everything is certainly intended literally, but the seven-day framework is just that — a framework.

As Victor Hamilton in his 1990 commentary on Genesis 1 wrote, “A literary reading of Genesis 1...understands ‘day’ not as a chronological account of how many hours God invested in his creating project, but as an analogy of God’s creative activity. God reveals himself to his people in a medium [a seven-day week] with which they can identify and which they can comprehend.”

### **How the ancients saw the world**

We need to understand that, for most peoples of the ancient world, all the various regions of nature were divine. There were sky gods, earth gods and water gods, gods of light and darkness, rivers and vegetation, animals and fertility. Everywhere the ancients turned, there were divinities to be petitioned, appeased, or pacified.

Each day of Creation in Genesis 1 takes on two principal categories of divinity and declares

that these are not gods at all but creations of the one and only true God. This includes humans, none of whom — not even kings or pharaohs — are to be worshipped as gods.<sup>2</sup>

Hebrew monotheism (one God) was a unique and hard-won faith. The temptations of idolatry and syncretism (blended religion) were everywhere. Later in history, it came to be understood just how liberating was the concept of monotheism. From time immemorial, superstitious people have attributed natural phenomena, or calamities like earthquakes, volcanic eruptions and tsunamis, to gods who were beyond understanding (except by a priestly elite) and had to be appeased and not questioned. Genesis 1, on the other hand, asserts that there are no gods but God and that his creation is comprehensible and amenable to investigation. This perspective made possible the scientific study of nature.

Verse 16 of Genesis 1, when understood, is amusing. As an intentional put-down, it deliberately reverses the order of the chief deities of a well-known cosmogony. The sun — called the “greater light” to avoid using the only available Semitic names for the sun, which were names of deities — comes first, then the moon, the “lesser light.” The stars — the highest deities — are barely mentioned in a throw-away line: “He made the stars also”! Not only that, Genesis 1 makes it plain that they are not to be worshipped; they were made to serve — daily, seasonally, and calendrically. And none is accorded astrological significance.

You see the contrast? In this chapter, God overcomes darkness, makes order out of chaos, and even makes the great sea creatures, which, as it happens, are not monstrous. The impressive orderliness of Genesis 1 and its patterned structure are a deliberate response to pagan mythologies. The Hebrew God has no competitor and there is no cosmic battle going on. Everything is under control.

### **No contest**

Genesis 1 is not at odds with modern geology and biological science. This is not an issue here. To insist that it does violence both to Scripture and to science. As Victor Hamilton wrote, “This is a word from God addressed to a group of people who are surrounded by nations whose cosmology is informed by polytheism and the mythology that flows out of that polytheism. Much in Genesis 1 is patently anti-pagan.... The writer’s concerns were theological.”

Both Henri Blocher and Rick Watts (see Further Reading) have highlighted the similarities and differences between the Genesis account and some themes apparent in Egyptian cosmogonies (something relatively few scholars have attempted). In short, Genesis 1 is a

corrective against polytheistic concepts encountered by the Israelites in their old land as well as in their new.

### **Further reading**

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Hyers, M.C. The Meaning of Creation: Genesis and Modern Science. Westminster John Knox, 1984. 216 pages.

Watts, R. “Making Sense of Genesis 1.” Stimulus 12(4) (2004): 2–12.  
[www.stimulus.org.nz/index\\_files/Stim12\\_4RikkWatts.pdf](http://www.stimulus.org.nz/index_files/Stim12_4RikkWatts.pdf).

### **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> Moses is taken to be the author of Genesis. As Henri Blocher, Professor of Theology at Wheaton College, Illinois, has written: “We stand...with the contemporary specialists who maintain the traditional positions, those suggested by the Bible itself, which associate Genesis with the work of Israel’s most powerful thinker, ‘our Teacher,’ as the Jews call him, Moses.” And for good reason — his training in Egypt and his later pastoral life uniquely equipped him intellectually and spiritually, as one who was “instructed in all the wisdom of the Egyptians” (Acts 7: 22) and who was filled with the Spirit of wisdom, which he later passed on to Joshua (Deuteronomy 34:9)

<sup>2</sup> All humans, men and women equally, not just pharaohs and kings, are said to be made in the likeness of God, with the royal prerogative of rulership (properly, stewardship) over the earth. This equality of men and women, extended to common folk, was revolutionary teaching!

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## **Creation and Evolution:**

### **How Did God Bring About the Rich Variety of Species on Earth?**

Almost 150 years ago Charles Darwin published *The Origin of Species*. The debate between science and religion has been fast and furious ever since. Darwin proposed that life on earth began hundreds of millions of years ago and developed by evolution through natural selection—a stark contradiction of the Christian fundamentalist view that God created everything in six

literal 24-hour days.

Theologians had been arguing since the days of Augustine about how to rightly interpret the Creation account in the first chapter of Genesis, but Darwin's revolutionary ideas gave the debate a new face. "If you don't believe Genesis 1 is literally true, then you are questioning the whole Bible," evolution's opponents declared. "Reject evolution and you lock yourself into an anti-scientific worldview that blocks progress," its supporters argued.

Have you ever wanted simply to talk about the issue in a calm and reasonable way, without being made to look foolish, ignorant or hostile either to the Bible or to scientific discovery? Perhaps such a conversation would go something like this:

*I'm confused. I'm not a theologian and I'm not a scientist. But I know what the Bible says about how life began, and I also know basically how the theory of evolution explains it. They can't both be right, can they? So who do I believe — God or the scientists?*

That's a good question, but it isn't quite as easy as that. This is not a straightforward "either/or" issue. There are many sides to it with a lot of misunderstanding thrown in, and it is quite understandable that you are confused, so let's look at this broad question in some detail.

*I have heard that some Christian denominations have dropped their opposition to the evolutionary theory and now accept evolution by natural selection as a valid explanation of the development of life.*

It's true that many major denominations have come to terms with Charles Darwin's theory, in one way or another. The Church of England has officially apologized to him for the decades of misrepresentation. However, millions of Christians still firmly reject evolution in favor of an explanation based on a more or less literal interpretation of the Genesis 1 account of Creation. This is particularly true in the United States, where some surveys show that more than half the population claims not to believe in evolution.

There are two major schools of thought on how to resolve the conflict.

*Really? What are they?*

One is Creationism and the other is Intelligent Design. Creationism is a term to describe the belief that the Genesis 1 account of Creation should be understood in strictly literal terms. Creationists typically believe that the seven days in Genesis 1 were 24 hours in length, and they are adamant that anything short of this literalist interpretation necessarily leads to undermining the rest of the Bible.

The problem is that such an interpretation flies in the face of scientific research, and, for many, it defies common sense. Creationism is not allowed to be taught in public schools as an alternative to evolution, because it is considered a religious idea, not a scientific one. If we're realistic, we have to admit that this is true. Creationism does not offer a proven, rigorous and valid scientific alternative to evolution, but is based on a single narrow interpretation of the first chapter of the Bible.

Many Christians prefer an alternative explanation, known as "Intelligent Design" (ID). Proponents of ID accept the findings of science, but argue that evolution cannot explain certain features in the development of life. These unexplained features, or "gaps," are evidence of an "intelligent Designer," they claim.

In an effort to skirt the ban on teaching religion as science in public schools, they do not insist that the Designer be called God. They thus hoped that ID could be taught in schools as an alternative to Darwinian evolution. But this was challenged in a historic case in York County, Pennsylvania, where it was ruled that Intelligent Design could not be classified as science, because it incorporated a supernatural element. Even though it did not specify the identity of the Designer, it was, in the court's opinion, another form of creationism.

However, it isn't just the courts who have a problem with ID. Many scientists who are also committed Christians (and there *are* many) point out that although ID may at first seem to be a plausible approach, it is dependent on an unstable "God of the Gaps" theoretical foundation.

*A what?*

Opponents of Darwin's theory have always pointed out that there are inconsistencies and gaps that evolution by natural selection cannot explain. For example, they point out the lack of fossils of transition species. They also make the point that when you consider the mathematical odds against even one living cell being formed by a chance combination of non-living components, there has not been enough time for evolution to have taken place. In fact, they say, the odds are so great as to be impossible, no matter how much time elapses.

These are reasonable objections — there do appear to be "gaps" in the theory of evolution by natural selection. Opponents of evolution then seize on those "gaps" as evidence of the supernatural action of the Creator, who becomes "the God of the Gaps."

The trouble is that any time further research fills in a particular gap, the "God of the Gaps" idea loses some of its force. Breakthroughs in scientific disciplines such as molecular biology

have refined the theory of evolution by natural selection and have steadily eroded what once looked like irrefutable arguments against evolution. The “God of the Gaps” domain is steadily shrinking. Not all the gaps have closed yet, and there are still some important unanswered questions. But as new research continues to uncover answers, the traditional challenges to evolution are losing ground.

A growing number of believing scientists are recognizing that to fight a rearguard action for the “God of the Gaps” is not the right approach. A fact is a fact, even if it is an inconvenient one. And if the facts show that evolution is the most likely explanation for the development of species, they must come to terms with it. They call themselves Theistic Evolutionists.

*“Theistic Evolution”! Sounds like a contradiction in terms.*

Maybe, but it isn’t. Theistic evolutionists accept the findings of science, and see no contradiction between the theory of evolution and a proper understanding of the biblical account in Genesis 1. Some prefer the term “evolutionary creation.”

*But surely there is a contradiction. Evolution claims that species have evolved over hundreds of millions of years. Doesn’t this contradict what the Bible says—that God directly created each and every life form?*

Not necessarily. The Bible only tells us that God is Creator; it says nothing about *how* he created. The scientific evidence does indicate that the various species of life have evolved over a very long period of time.

*But how can we be so sure about that?*

We can’t be 100 percent sure, of course. All science can do is study the evidence that has been left behind in fossil form and apply current knowledge and techniques, such as genetic science and the various radiometric dating methods, in order to form conclusions that seem in keeping with the evidence.

What theistic evolutionists are saying is that the revelation of the Bible in no way rules out the possibility of life forms evolving through time. Although the number of theistic evolutionists is still small, they have introduced some ideas that are worth considering. [Readers who would like to know more could consult books by Karl Giberson, Ted Peters and Martinez Hewlett, and Denis Lamoureux.]

*But why would God have used a process like evolution?*

Why not? You could equally well ask, “Why did Creation take him six days? Couldn’t he

have done it all in one instant?” But leaving the question of life for a moment, let’s take a look at the way God may have brought the universe into existence.

Most scientists believe that our vast universe came into being in one “big bang” some 15 billion years ago. Not all believe this, but let’s say for argument’s sake that this is when and how the universe got started. At the moment of the big bang and for some considerable time afterwards, galaxies, stars and planets did not exist. The universe evolved over billions of years to a kind of soup of hydrogen atoms, and then expanded over more billions of years during which galaxies, stars, planets and other elements of the universe came into existence. Thus the universe became what it is today through gradual development, the natural consequences of God’s original creative act. Perhaps God also did something like that with life on earth. The point is that a process like evolution need not contradict the reality that God is Creator.

*But if you accept that the universe is 15 billion years old and that life on earth is billions of years old, doesn’t that contradict the biblical revelation in Genesis 1 that God created everything in six literal days or, as a few Creationists suggest, several thousand years?*

It contradicts only if you insist on a literal interpretation of Genesis 1. And if you insist on a literal interpretation of this skeletal framework of days, this could only be six 24-hour periods.

The first problem with accepting a six-day creation is that it flies in the face of common logic and everything that has been discovered about how the universe came into existence and developed. (As you say, a few Creationists have stepped back from a literal interpretation of Genesis 1 and have assigned a life to the universe in the tens of thousands of years. Their reasoning not only ignores science, but manufactures a new interpretation of Genesis 1 based on their own imagination.)

All theories of a “young universe” are contradicted by the evidence of astrophysics about the age of the universe and from geology and paleontology about the age of the earth. On the other hand, accepting an age of the universe in the billions of years does not contradict either science or the biblical witness. The Bible only says that God created all things that exist; it does not speak to the question of the manner of the creative process or how long the creative process took — or whether it is continuing even today.

*Are you saying that a literal interpretation of the Bible is wrong?*

It depends on the passage. Parts of the Bible that are intended to be understood literally should be understood literally, and parts that are intended to be understood figuratively should be

taken figuratively. For example, some 40 percent of the Bible consists of poetry and metaphors.

It is a misinterpretation of the Bible to interpret poetic statements literally. For example, God is not a literal hen, rock, tower, or shepherd, even though the Bible describes him in such terms. Likewise, when Jesus said the Pharisees were blind guides and that they swallow camels, he did not intend for anyone to interpret his statements literally; he intended that they be interpreted figuratively. Nor did Jesus intend that people interpret his parables as literal stories of literal people; he intended them to be understood as parables—made-up stories that illustrate a point.

It is not watering down the Bible to read it the way it is intended. Poetry should be understood as poetry, metaphors as metaphors, similes as similes, and parables as parables. “Literal” and “true” are not the same thing, and the truth is, to interpret things literally that are not intended to be interpreted literally is to miss the truth completely.

*I hadn't thought about it that way. So give me an example of how Genesis 1 can be interpreted in a poetic or metaphorical way.*

Think of the writer of Genesis 1 as living at a time when common oral (and eventually written) traditions included creation epics that presented visible phenomena, such as the stars, the planets, the sun, moon, land, sea and animals, as gods. Some of these creation epics began with a preexistent primordial mound out of which the first god springs, who then in one way or another produces the other gods. Another variation has the sea as the first god. Such epics were the standard approach to explaining the origin of the universe.

Contrast that with the Creation story in Genesis 1. It uses the standard style and genre of creation epics at the time. But using that standard style, it makes the radical declaration that the God of Israel, completely unlike all the gods of the nations, did not emerge from anything, nor was he ever part of the universe. Quite the contrary, this God created everything out of nothing simply by the power of his word. Each of the things thought of by the nations as being gods is systematically presented as having been created by this God and being declared “good” by this God, demonstrating his utter power over them.

Genesis 1 is about the Who of Creation, not the how. We should let the writer of Genesis 1 make his theological statement to us about who God is as Creator in contrast to the gods of the nations and not try to interpret him as providing us some kind of scientific police blotter of literal events and dates.

*So should we be distinguishing between the fact that God created all things on one hand and how he might have caused it all to come about on the other?*

Yes. There is a needless conflict between science and religion on the matter of the Creation. The biblical revelation tells us that the God who revealed himself to Israel and who has revealed himself to humanity in Jesus Christ is the Creator of all that exists. This revelation is not interested in detailing the physical processes he might have used to bring about this universe that humanity is part of and has, as God's gift, both the capacity and the joy of studying and learning about.

This means that nothing factual that science can say about how the universe came into being or how the process of creation has unfolded throughout the history of the earth can contradict the biblical revelation—as long as the scientific speculation doesn't conclude that God is not the Creator of all that exists.

*But doesn't evolutionary theory insist that everything came into existence without a Creator?*

No. It's true that some scientists claim that everything came into being naturally, spontaneously — without God's original creative act. But that is a philosophical statement, not a scientific one.

On the other hand, many scientists do believe in God, and they do not discount the biblical revelation that God is Creator. They do their scientific work by studying the physical phenomena in the universe that are the result of God's creative act. They accept that Genesis 1 tells us that God has created all things, but recognize that Genesis 1 does not tell us how the creation process has unfolded or how long it has taken to unfold. Scientists, using whatever evidence is available, seek to better understand the wonders of the amazing universe God has brought into being.

*So where does that leave me — the average person? What is the proper approach for a Christian?*

We suggest curiosity mixed with humility. There are strident and often angry voices raised on both sides of this question. They only make the argument increasingly bitter and the divide wider. The fact that many scientists can accept the findings of science that point to evolutionary changes in the forms of life, while remaining committed to their Christian faith, should be encouraging to the rest of us. It does not have to be an either/or argument.

In fact, it does not have to be an argument at all. Realistic scientists know that they might

never uncover all the mysteries of creation.

“Take a long, hard look. See how great he is — infinite, greater than anything you could ever imagine or figure out!” (Job 36:26, Message Bible)

But as the Proverbs remind us: “God delights in concealing things; scientists delight in discovering things” (Proverbs 25:2, Message Bible). We may never fully resolve these questions in this life, but it is a legitimate and exciting quest, and we are discovering wonderful things along the way.

Grace Communion International, publishers of this magazine, sums it up like this:

“We believe that God gave the scientific record for human instruction and knowledge and that there is no conflict between the Bible and science. We believe that when the Bible and scientific discovery appear to conflict, that one or the other has been misunderstood. Therefore, we do not deny the evidence from science that indicates a long history of life on this planet. We believe that only God can create life, and that the Creator has not revealed exactly how he has done this.” ([source](#))

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## **Should Intelligent Design Be Taught in the Science Classroom?**

In the last few years the concept of Intelligent Design (ID) has really hit the news headlines. Articles in major weeklies like *Time* and editorials in other magazines and newspapers have discussed the pros and cons of the controversy, which has been raging especially in the United States.

What is Intelligent Design? It is the idea that, because the universe and life are so complex, they must be the deliberate creation of a higher power. That power is not usually named as God by ID enthusiasts — the point of Intelligent Design theory is merely to introduce the notion of a Designer into the science classroom, as a counter to evolutionism, without necessarily making a statement about who the designer may be.

Predictably, the scientific community has reacted very strongly against this. They say it is merely a ploy to introduce the creationist interpretation of origins into education. [Strictly, Creationism is a particular interpretation of Genesis 1, the first chapter in the Bible. What might be called “young-earth creationists” argue that the universe, earth, and all life were created in

just six days about 10,000 years ago. But the term is usually also applied to “old-earth creationists,” who accept scientific evidence that the universe is billions of years old but nevertheless argue that God created all there is by separate acts of fiat (“Let there be ...”) during those billions of years.] Most scientists, on the other hand, including many Christian scientists, point out that science cannot prove the existence of God, therefore invoking him to explain something in nature that we may not yet understand, in fact explains nothing. To do so brings all scientific enquiry to a halt.

Ironically, these scientists may have Scripture on their side. Jesus Christ specifically said, “God is Spirit.” What this means is that God, who created time, space and matter, is outside time and space and is non-material, therefore he cannot be detected by the tools of science. He cannot be seen, measured, weighed, quantified, or objectified.

Science is simply inadequate to the task of pointing to any one difficult-to-explain gap in scientific knowledge and saying, “There, this definitely, measurably, objectively proves beyond all doubt that God is responsible for the existence of...” The sentence might be completed in any number of ways, such as: the fundamental forces of nature, star formation, proteins and nucleic acids, living cells, complex organs like the eye, species, and so on. This doesn’t mean God may not be behind all these things—it’s just that the scientific method cannot prove it one way or the other.

This actually poses no problem to Christianity. Christian scholars and commentators note that the Bible points out that God can only be known spiritually and relationally. While the Bible does clearly say that the creation is God’s handiwork and gives evidence of his existence, this is in terms of general revelation. This is why some Christian scientists have no difficulty with, say, the concept of biological evolution, arguing that God fully gifted the creation with the ability to be and to become. These scientists make a distinction between evolution (a natural process that may itself have been created) and *evolutionism* (an atheistic philosophy that denies the possibility of a creator). Whatever the case, many theologians are themselves agreeing that the idea of Intelligent Design does not belong in the science classroom, though it certainly belongs in classes on religion or cultural history.

This is why, on November 18, 2005, the Vatican’s chief astronomer, astrophysicist George Coyne, stated that “Intelligent Design” isn’t science and doesn’t belong in science classrooms. While reaffirming God’s role in creation, he said that science explains the history of the

universe.

Even the conservative U.S. ministry group *Reasons to Believe* recently stated,

As it currently stands, we believe ID should *not* be taught in biology class. That is not to say we think there's a lack of evidence in the record of nature for the work of an Intelligent Designer. Far from it! ... However, at this juncture, ID isn't formulated as a scientific theory. To date, ID has not developed an origins model with scientifically testable assertions and falsifiable predictions. No ID theory accounts for the history of the universe and of life. There are no ID predictions about what scientists should discover when they examine the record of nature. Without a testable model, ID cannot guide future scientific investigation.

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## **Duty of Care?**

### **What Is a Christian's Responsibility Toward the Rest of Creation?**

Although he does not realize it, the outstanding British naturalist and broadcaster Sir David Attenborough inspired this article. It was something he said in an interview earlier this year.

He spoke of “the influence of the Bible’s book of Genesis, which says the Lord God said ‘go forth and multiply’ to Adam and Eve and ‘the natural world is there for you to dominate, you have dominion of the animals and plants of the world.’ That basic notion — that the world is there for us, and if it doesn’t serve our purposes it’s dispensable — has produced the devastation of vast areas. We have assumed that we can build a house on it, dig it up, put tarmac over it; that’s OK because it’s there for us.” The interview was printed in the February 19 issue of *Nature*, the most prestigious scientific magazine in the United Kingdom.

The viewpoint that Sir David was paraphrasing was based on a highly influential paper published in *Science*, the U.S. equivalent of *Nature*, by UCLA (University of California, Los Angeles) historian Lynn White in March 1967. Titled “The historical roots of our ecologic crisis,” White asserted that “Christianity bears a huge burden of guilt” for environmental damage since the Middle Ages.

### **Blame Christianity**

In his paper, White admitted that humans have affected nature in the communities where they lived throughout history. In many hunter-gatherer societies, the damage may have been

relatively mild, but even pre-industrial humans significantly altered the environment through the use of fire and even caused the extinction of large animals, as on Mediterranean islands, the Great Plains of America and in New Zealand.

But White's focus was on the European West. He noted how modern science and technology originated in the West, and he linked that development, in part, to the Judeo-Christian victory over paganism — that is, since God is Creator, nature should not be worshiped and does not need to be feared. White referred to Genesis when wrote, “Man named all the animals, thus establishing his dominance over them. God planned all of this explicitly for man's benefit and rule: no item in the physical creation had any purpose save to serve man's purposes. And, although man's body is made of clay, he is not simply part of nature; he is made in God's image.”

White noted that in ancient times, every tree, spring, stream and hill had its guardian spirit. Before anyone cut a tree, mined a mountain or dammed a brook, it was important to make the spirit happy. However, “by destroying pagan animism, Christianity made it possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural objects.” People no longer cared about the environmental results of what they did, and this attitude toward nature has continued, argued White. Therefore, “We shall continue to have a worsening ecological crisis until we reject the Christian axiom that nature has no reason for existence save to serve man.”

In the decades since the publication of the *Science* paper, hundreds of books and articles used White's ideas as a focal point. His ideas can be seen in the popular press, in a very diverse range of periodicals such as *Time*, *Horizon*, *The New York Times*, *The Boy Scout Handbook* and *The Sierra Club Bulletin*. Eventually, American writer Wendell Berry observed that people assume that Christianity is to blame, and it is powerless to do anything about the problem: “The culpability of Christianity in the destruction of the natural world, and uselessness of Christianity in any effort to correct that destruction, are now established clichés of the conservation movement.”

### **Was White right?**

Since 1967, there have been numerous rebuttals of his controversial thesis. The most obvious is that ecological abuses have been done by almost every civilization in history, not just Christian ones. Humans never needed the book of *Genesis* to justify ruining their environment. Moreover, such a reading of Genesis seriously misinterprets what the book means.

The 1611 Authorized Version of the Bible that generations of Christians grew up with translates the grossly misunderstood verses of Genesis 1:26–28 like this:

“And God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth.’

“So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them. And God blessed them, and God said unto them, “Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.”

To understand this passage, we must read it in two ways — exegetically and christologically. That is, what does it mean in context, and how are we to understand it in light of the incarnation of God in Christ? Contextually, “dominion” represents the right to rule, in this case a transferred right, given to men and women. They bear the image of God, and must therefore rule on behalf of God. They do not rule in their own right — they must reflect the attitude that *God* has toward his creation.

And what is that? Verse 31: “And God saw everything that he had made, and, behold, it was very good.” His creation pleases him — and he still owns it.

### **Look after it — it is good**

God plainly declares: “all the earth is *mine*” (Exodus 19:5), “all the land is *mine*” (Leviticus 22:9), “every beast of the forest is *mine*, and the cattle upon a thousand hills...for the world is *mine* and the fullness thereof” (Psalm 50:10–12).

That means the redwoods of California do not belong to the government of California, the Amazonian rainforest does not belong to Brazil, and the oceans and fishes do not belong to the coastal nations and fishers of the world. They are all God’s, and he likes them, and he cares about them.

This explains the command of Genesis 2:15: “And the Lord God took the man, and put him into the Garden of Eden *to dress it and to keep it*” — *to improve it and maintain it*. This is a stewardship role, and the principle extends beyond the Garden to the rest of creation. *Dominion* does not mean *domination* — it means royal servanthood, which was the way of life shown to us by Jesus. Although we humans have failed miserably to conform to the image of God, Jesus, the only true *Imago Dei*, was a perfect success.

To the disciples he explained: “Kings like to throw their weight around.... It’s not going to be that way with you. Let the senior among you become like the junior; let the leader act the part of the servant” (Luke 22:25–36, *The Message*).

This approach to ruling people — an expression of the command to love fellow human beings as ourselves—applies to the nonhuman creation as well. We are to help the creation, not abuse it by throwing our weight around. Though we may farm and use animals to supply our food, for example, we must not treat them cruelly or cause them unnecessary stress (see Proverbs 12:10: “A righteous man cares for the needs of his animal”).

On a larger scale, we should consider the health of our entire environment, and follow the example of the Father in keeping track of animal populations (Matthew 10:29) and ensuring their survival. Plant-eating and meat-eating animals depend on their Creator (Psalm 104:14, 21), and so do the birds (Matthew 6:26).

In one command, the Bible gives an excellent ecological principle: “If you come across a bird’s nest beside the road, either in a tree or on the ground and the mother is sitting on the young or on the eggs, do not take the mother with the young. You may take the young, but be sure to let the mother go, *so that it may go well with you*” (Deuteronomy 22:6–7).

The law against harming a mother bird is not some quirky idea inserted by an eccentric bird lover. The idea is that the mother bird will then have a chance to have more baby birds. In that way the people will not destroy the source of life, but will be living in the land in a way that can be sustained for centuries. Humans are to live on earth in a way that can be *sustained*. We should not destroy so much habitat that various animals can no longer survive and reproduce.

This passage from Deuteronomy makes plain that sustainable environmental management is important for our own well-being — we need the “goods and services” our environment provides, too! As *Time* magazine recently pointed out, we are in danger of being the last generation to see some major species alive.

### **Rooted in our beliefs**

Lynn White was right about one thing — our attitudes toward nature are rooted in our religious beliefs: “What people do about their ecology depends on what they think about themselves in relation to things around them. Human ecology is deeply conditioned by beliefs about our nature and destiny — that is, by religion.”

Why is there an ecological crisis? At heart, the problem is *sin*.

It is helpful to notice the differences between Genesis 1 and 2. Whereas the Bible's first chapter proclaims the one true God of Israel as the powerful Creator of everything that is, Genesis 2 is more pastoral and relational. This chapter focuses on relationships at three levels, with God, fellow humans, and the rest of creation. Then Genesis 3 shows how all of those relationships were fractured, with "thorns and thistles" being a poetic expression of the environmental results of a flawed relationship with God. God intended humanity and nature to be in harmony, but sin has disrupted the relationship.

Human sin is part of the wider context of spiritual opposition to God. Happily, the environmental distress experienced by creation was resolved by the death and crucifixion of Jesus, but the age to come has not yet fully arrived. So, for now, the creation "waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed" (Romans 8:19- 21). But do we understand the implications of our *current* status?

The fact is, we Christians are already the children of God, and although the age to come is still in the future, we are privileged to participate in it as we live and share the gospel. Since Christians are part of God's solution for the planet, we should be setting an example of "creation care." Thankfully, many Christian biologists, writers, pastors and churches have been and are taking this responsibility seriously. Denominational statements expressing a theology of the environment have been issued within Catholicism, Anglicanism, and Evangelicalism (see box on page 7). Do an Internet search on "creation care" and you will see how active Christian environmental concern now is.

### **But what about the "end times"?**

Some wonder, why bother with the environment? Doesn't the book of Revelation predict that it's all going to go up in smoke anyway? And if so, aren't our conservation efforts pointless? Some Christians seem to think so. A Baptist church in Boise, Idaho, prints and distributes a bumper sticker that says "Forget 'Save the Earth'—What about your soul? The earth is going to burn, What about you?"

Revelation is a special kind of literature — apocalyptic — that uses highly symbolic, exaggerated language to communicate a theological message. The whole point of the book is that God will bring to an end the sinful, destructive ways of humanity that have polluted all of the Edenic relationships God established in Genesis 2. Let us not overlook the warning in Revelation 11:18, "the time has come...for destroying those who destroy the earth."

Contrary to some popular ideas, God is not planning to destroy the earth after whisking the faithful out of harm's way. Far from destroying the earth, God says he will *transform* it. It will literally be a heavenly earth when "God dwells with man" (Revelation 21:3).

In small but positive ways, we can participate in that transformation in advance in the good things we do now and in the years ahead to be faithful stewards and take care of the world that God has created and assigned us to maintain. A balanced, responsible care for the creation that has been entrusted to us is not a waste of time. It is an important step in the right direction.

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### **Statement on Christian Stewardship from the National Association of Evangelicals**

We labor to protect God's creation.

As we embrace our responsibility to care for God's earth, we reaffirm the important truth that we worship only the Creator and not the creation. God gave the care of his earth and its species to our first parents. That responsibility has passed into our hands. We affirm that God-given dominion is a sacred responsibility to steward the earth and not a license to abuse the creation of which we are a part. We are not the owners of creation, but its stewards, summoned by God to "watch over and care for it" (Gen. 2:15). This implies the principle of sustainability: our uses of the Earth must be designed to conserve and renew the Earth rather than to deplete or destroy it.

The Bible teaches us that God is not only redeeming his people, but is also restoring the whole creation (Rom. 8:18-23). Just as we show our love for the Savior by reaching out to the lost, we believe that we show our love for the Creator by caring for his creation. Because clean air, pure water, and adequate resources are crucial to public health and civic order, government has an obligation to protect its citizens from the effects of environmental degradation. This involves the urgent need to relieve human suffering caused by bad environmental practice. Because natural systems are extremely complex, human actions can have unexpected side effects. We must therefore approach our stewardship of creation with humility and caution.

Human beings have responsibility for creation in a variety of ways. We urge Christians to shape their personal lives in creation-friendly ways: practicing effective recycling, conserving resources, and experiencing the joy of contact with nature. We urge government to encourage fuel efficiency, reduce pollution, encourage sustainable use of natural resources, and provide for the proper care of wildlife and their natural habitats.

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Grace Communion International is a Christian denomination with more than 47,000

members, worshiping in about 900 congregations in almost 100 nations and territories. We began in 1934 and our main office is in southern California. In the United States, we are members of the National Association of Evangelicals and similar organizations in other nations. We welcome you to visit our website at [www.gci.org](http://www.gci.org).

If you want to know more about the gospel of Jesus Christ, we offer help. First, we offer weekly worship services in hundreds of congregations worldwide. Perhaps you'd like to visit us. A typical worship service includes songs of praise, a message based on the Bible, and opportunity to meet people who have found Jesus Christ to be the answer to their spiritual quest. We try to be friendly, but without putting you on the spot. We do not expect visitors to give offerings—there's no obligation. You are a guest.

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We also offer personal counsel. If you have questions about the Bible, salvation or Christian living, we are happy to talk. If you want to discuss faith, baptism or other matters, a pastor near you can discuss these on the phone or set up an appointment for a longer discussion. We are convinced that Jesus offers what people need most, and we are happy to share the good news of what he has done for all humanity. We like to help people find new life in Christ, and to grow in that life. Come and see why we believe it's the best news there could be!

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Grace Communion International  
P.O. Box 5005  
Glendora, CA 91740-0730  
800-423-4444

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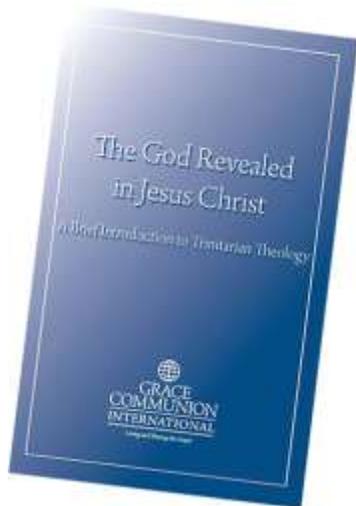
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