



Part 2: Seven Days of Controversy?

Genesis 1:1 – 2:3

The creation stories of Genesis are intended to give us a theological understanding of origins rather than a scientific account of origins.

I. Stepping Into the Controversy

Most of the alleged conflict between the Bible and science narrows down to Genesis 1-11 and particularly the two creation stories in Genesis 1-2.

Q: Do the creation stories provide us with a scientific account of our origins? Is the only faithful reading of Genesis 1-2 a young earth scenario that is in conflict with the widely accepted view in science that the cosmos is billions of years old?

Q: How do we begin to sort this out?

Bible-believing Christians fall into two basic camps with variations in those camps:

1. Those who believe Genesis is offering us a scientific account of our material origins: Young Earth Creationist (YEC) & Old Earth Creationist (OEC). This school of interpretation is called “concordism” in which the interpreter tries to correlate the text with modern science. The interpreter believes modern science is embedded in the text or it dictates what modern science should look like.
2. Those who believe Genesis is not intended to offer us a scientific account of our material origins but are using cultural and literary forms to communicate theological truths (my camp).

Note: Those in the literary, cultural camp do not believe the Bible addresses the age of the earth. This is based on many factors including the denial that Hebrew genealogies are intended to identify every generation.

II. Reading the Text as a Cross-Cultural Missionary

“The complications involved in the receiving end of the process of literary communication is quite simply that while the Bible was written for us, it was not written to us. . . It is absolutely imperative that we remember that the biblical books were written to a specific ancient audience and not to those of us who are reading them in the 21st century. Thus, it is critical that we recover the. . . ‘cognitive environment’ of any passage that we read.” Tremper Longman, *Confronting Old Testament Controversies*, 16

Crucial considerations for interpretation:

1. Historical, cultural context
2. Genre of literature (genre triggers reading strategy)
3. Language

A. Historical Context

The creation stories were given to the Israelites after their rescue from Egypt to teach and correct their theology about Yahweh vs the pagan gods. There is one Creator God who rules the world graciously through ethics. The creation accounts were written not to counter Darwinism but ancient myths concerning who created creation.

B. Genre of literature

“What, then is the genre of the Genesis creation account?... we can describe the creation account as an artistic, literary representation of creation intended to fortify God’s covenant with creation. It represents truths about origins in anthropomorphic language so that the covenant community may have a proper worldview and be wise unto salvation. It represents the world is coming into being through God’s proclamation so that the world depends on his will, purpose, and presence.” Bruce Waltke, *Genesis*

III. A Broad Overview of Genesis One

A. The Ancient Near Eastern Concept of Creation

In the ancient world, people were concerned about functional roles more than material properties. Creation was not viewed primarily as a process by which matter was brought into being, but a process by which functions roles, order, organization and

stability were established. The actual creative act is to assign something its functioning role in the ordered system. This is what brings it into existence. See John Walton, *The Lost World of Genesis One*

This functional view of creation is supported by the usual meaning of the Hebrew verb “create” (*bara*), which is always used with an express or implied deity as its subject. The uses largely reveal the concept of the deity creating a function for something rather than creating its material existence.

B. The Days of Creation (see chart)

It becomes obvious that the author does not claim that these days of creation are actual 24-hour days. The sun, moon, and stars are not created until after the fourth day, and these celestial bodies define days with evening and morning.

Note: The insistence that the days of creation are six literal 24-hour days is pretty much a modern idea. The Church fathers believed that creation took place in the blink of an eye, and the days were a literary device to proclaim that God created everything. See Longman, *Confronting Old Testament Controversies*, 28

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|-------------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------|------------------------------|
| Creation of realms | Day 1 Light and darkness | Day 2 Sky and sea | Day 3 Land and vegetation |
| Creation of inhabitants | Day 4 Sun, moon, and stars | Day 5 Birds and fish | Day 6 Animals and humans |

“The presentation of creation through ‘days’ reveals God’s sovereign ordering of creation and God’s care to accommodate himself to humanity in finite and understandable terms. God’s decision to create the cosmos through successive days, not instantaneous fiat, serves as a paradigm for his development of humanity through successive eras of history.” Bruce Waltke, *Genesis*

“It appears that Genesis itself is not interested in giving us a clear and unambiguous understanding of the nature of the creation days. This ambiguity fits in with the overall impression we get of the passage, that it is not concerned to tell us the process of creation. Rather, it is intent on simply celebrating and asserting the fact that God is Creator.” Tremper Longman, *How to Read Genesis*

C. The Third Day (Genesis 1:9-13)

Genesis 1:11-13 describes the land producing fully mature vegetation in a single day. While it's possible God could have created a miraculous introduction to plant life, it seems congruent with the rest of the creation story to see this as a figurative description of creation.

D. The Expanse/Firmament/Vault (Genesis 1:6-8, 14-19)

The Hebrew *raqia* is variously translated, but it has the idea of a beaten metal plate. In the ancient near east, people thought the sky resembled a great dome or vault that held the celestial bodies in place. This obviously contradicts a scientific view, but it does indicate the author was using his cultural paradigms to communicate the creation story.

E. The Seventh Day: God Takes a Break (Genesis 2:2-3)

Everyone agrees that God did not need to rest from his work of creation. This is clearly a literary device to express God's design for his creatures. Moreover, there is also good evidence in the ancient near eastern cosmologies that the deity would rest on day seven in their temple after their act of creation. This communicated that the deity had resolved the crisis and stability was achieved. The temple was the place of rest of the deity and the control room over the creation.

F. The Lack of Sequence Concord with the Second Creation Story (Genesis 2:4-25)

The two creation accounts do not present the same sequence of creation. The most basic reading of these two stories is that neither account is interested in telling us the actual sequence of creation.

IV. The One, True God is Creator and Sustainer of All

God is the creator and sustainer of all. God has established His design and purposes for his creation including human beings. God is personal and loving.

We often want the answer to the *why* or *how* questions, but we do not usually receive those answers in a very clear way. Instead, God has chosen to answer the most important questions: Who am I? How can we know and trust Him?

Discussion Questions:

1. What has been your experience with the alleged conflict between science and the Genesis creation stories? Do you see this as a stumbling block to people and the gospel?
2. What, if anything, have you been taught about the interpretation of Genesis one? Does it seem reasonable that God would choose to communicate with the Israelites in a way they could understand? Does it seem reasonable that God would not choose to communicate a scientific explanation to a pre-scientific people?
3. What did you hear or read that helps you think about Genesis one? Might this help in the debate about science and Christianity?

Recommended Resources:

1. *Origins: A Reformed Look at Creation, Design, & Evolution* by Deborah & Loren Haarsma (Faith Alive, 2007).
2. *How to Read Genesis* by Tremper Longman (IVP, 2005).
3. *The Lost World of Adam and Eve* by John Walton (IVP Academic, 2015).
4. *Four Views of Creation, Evolution and Intelligent Design*, ed. J.B. Stump (Zondervan, 2017).
5. *Reading Genesis 1-2: An Evangelical Conversation*, ed. Daryl Charles (Tyndale, 2013).