

The Debate about Genesis 1-11

I. Introduction

The prevailing view among scholars (particularly Old Testament scholars) who still call themselves *Evangelical*, is that Genesis 1-11 is not a narrative of actual historical events as we usually define history (something that actually happened in time and space). Gen. 1-11 is seen as the equivalent of ancient near eastern creation and flood myths but devoid of most of the elements of paganism. In other words, it is only a work of literary genre. Does it matter? In this Briefing Outline it is our purpose to show that the preponderance of evidence, particularly from the Bible itself, is that Chapters 1-11, are to be interpreted as historical narrative and are foundational to the story of redemption and the trustworthiness of the rest of Scripture.

II. The Starting Assumptions of a Biblicist

- A. The Bible is infallible and inerrant. God is truth and His revelation in the original manuscripts is likewise truthful, and must therefore, be of necessity without error. If we allow for errors as some do, how do we decide what is truth and error? Ultimately the one deciding is then more authoritative than the Word itself. If one allows for errors, how can it (God's Revelation) be trusted to be completely authoritative in all it addresses? This issue is of paramount importance in the age of relativism in which we live (where a correspondence view of truth is denied). Kurt Wise says: [The Bible] *does not seek evidence for the veracity of God or Scripture, because such evidence would then have a higher status than God and His Word.* (*Faith, Form, and Time*, p. xv).
- B. Science is fallible. The scientific method is an invaluable tool to mankind, but utilized by fallible man makes it a fallible tool.
- C. Special Revelation is preeminent over General Revelation. *The natural world is not the 67th book of the Bible!* There is revelation in the natural world. We can know that God exists and that He is powerful (Rom. 1:19-20; Psalm 19), but nature is not on the same level as Holy Scripture.
- D. If a proclamation of Scripture appears clear but is contrary to what scientific establishment says, I will hold to the word of Scripture and assume there must be something wrong with the science. Why do this? Because Scripture, God's Revelation to man, is the beginning of knowledge; it holds the position of supreme authority.

III. What's Behind the Current Debate

Prior to Darwin's theory of Evolution (mid-19th century) that all life evolved from the simple to the complex by pure chance over millions of years, interpreters of Genesis One have almost without exception, interpreted the opening chapters of Genesis as narrative history, and the days of creation as consecutive, normal 24 hour days. Now more than a century and a half later, the educational and scientific establishment promote evolution *as settled science*. Evangelical scholars wanting to preserve their academic integrity face a dilemma: How to interpret the early chapters of Genesis? Recently, one well-known Evangelical OT scholar proclaimed: *The church must now except evolution or it will be seen as a cult.* The answer to this conundrum was to combine biblical theism and evolution. This unholy alliance, theistic evolution, is now the reigning view in most Evangelical colleges and seminaries. Most respond by affirming both theism and evolution.

IV. The Theistic Evolutionary Answer

The Biologos organization, with funding from large secular foundations, has become a powerful force in convincing the church (Evangelicals in particular) that evolution is settled science.

- A. Theistic evolution is usually accepted in one of two forms:
1. God creates the material universe, i.e., gets the process started, but evolution then proceeds by chance. This is the more deistic approach.
 2. God uses the evolution process (one specie developing into another; the simple to the complex) but God guides it providentially to His desired result. This view does not go over very well with the naturalistic scientists as you would expect, and it really is a form of intelligent design (isn't it?).
- B. Once you accept some form of evolutionary theory it goes without saying that you have to accept an ancient earth and cosmos. How then do scholars deal with the early chapters of Genesis? They have to deal with the early chapters of Genesis in a different light than a straight forward interpretation. Here are some of the proposed solutions:
1. A very early attempt to preserve the integrity of the creation story was to posit a long age gap (geological ages) between verses 1 and 2 of the first chapter. This became popular after 1876 in the book: *Earth Earliest Ages*, by G. H. Pember. It was popularized in the footnotes of the Scofield Bible (1917 edition, p.3). With this view, you could then see the *days* of creation as normal solar days. After much review by Hebraists it has been shown not to be grammatically tenable.
 2. Another theory posited was that the Hebrew word *day* can also mean an indefinite time as in *an era*. This view had several problems: a close study of how the word is used in Genesis 1 most certainly referred to 24 solar days. Also, the creative activity (the sequence) of the 6 creative days does not match up with how evolutionists perceived things evolved.
 3. Another creative way to incorporate the long eras of evolution was to have long time gaps between the days. This view, again, does not arise out of the Hebrew text. A variant of this view is that the *days of creation* are actually *days of revelation*.
 4. Currently the most popular view among OT scholars who want to maintain some integrity as Biblical scholars, is to claim the story is not meant to be historical narrative, but is simply a literary framework which the author chooses to tell his story of creation. With this view you can preserve the integrity of the Hebrew word *day*, and you can completely avoid the problem of the age of the earth. Of late it has come under a lot of criticism since it ignores the internal evidence that the passage is historical narrative.
 5. A variant of the above view is a literary framework interpretation but devoid of evolution. Some Christian scholars fully realizing the problems of evolution, and that of combining it with biblical theism, vow to interpret Gen. 1 in a normal manner (as six 24 hour solar days) yet still affirm that the cosmos and the earth are ancient. For them, not only is the theory of evolution under attack, but it cannot be harmonized with the biblical worldview. All well and good, however, they believe that an ancient cosmos and earth is settled science. While this may be the second most popular approach to interpreting the creation account, I have yet to see a satisfying defense of this position. What for example, do they believe happened during these billion and millions of years (if no evolution? Why did God need all this time? What they do not want to admit is that though they deny biological evolution, they are accepting cosmological and geological evolution! And then there is another question: those layers of sediments, the rock strata, they have fossils in them!
- C. The Major Problems with the Deistic Form of Theistic Evolution

Theologian Wayne Grudem points out TE cannot be construed to harmonize with sound biblical doctrine.

He points out 12 major differences between events recounted in the bible and TE: 1. Adam and Eve were not the first human beings. 2. Adam and Eve were born from human parents. 3. God did not act directly or specially to create Adam out of dust from the ground. 4. God did not directly create Eve from a rib taken from Adam's side. 5. Adam and Eve were never sinless human beings. 6. Adam and Eve did not commit the first human sins, for human beings were doing morally evil things long before Adam and Eve. 7. Human death did not begin as a result of Adam's sin, for human beings existed long before Adam and Eve and they were always subject to death. 8. Not all human beings have descended from Adam and Eve, for there were thousands of other human beings on earth at the time that God chose two of them as Adam and Eve. 9. God did not directly act in the natural world to create different *kinds* of fish, birds and land animals. 10. God did not *rest* from his work of creation or stop any special creative activity after plants, animals, and human beings appeared on the earth. 11. God never created an originally *very good* natural world in the sense of a world that was a safe environment, free of thorns and thistles and similar harmful things. 12. After Adam and Eve sinned, God did not place any curse on the world that changed the workings of the natural world and made it more hostile to mankind. (From: *Theistic Evolution*, p.72-73.). For more reasons why evolution cannot be harmonized with a biblical worldview see: Briefing Outline #4, and for a philosophical critique of evolution see: Briefing Outline #41.

V. The six negative theological consequences of an old earth view

(These ideas are adapted from Thomas Purifoy, Jr, the director of the video: *Is Genesis History?*)

1. God's Goodness Must Be Reflected in the Original Creation

Affirming the goodness of the original creation is non-negotiable. What does that goodness look like? It is full of life-giving power and bounty. This is what we see in Genesis 1. God pronounces His original creation 'good' and 'very good.' It was a world of plenty and beauty without animal carnivory (Gen 1:30) and without corruption and death (Rom 8:21). Yet this picture of an artistically-designed, beautiful world only fits within the chronology of 6-day creation. If one adopts the conventional chronology, the Earth slowly formed through billions of years of uninhabitable environments. God eventually created the first complex marine life, then progressively created or evolved different types of organisms. These experienced death and massive extinction events that led to the destruction of trillions of living creatures. All this happened long before the appearance of Adam and Eve. Anyone who chooses to accept an old universe implicitly accepts the historical events that go with it. It is a history filled with lifelessness and death, not the goodness of God.

2. Adam's Sin Resulted in Universal Corruption and Death

According to the conventional chronology, corruption has always been a part of the universe. This can be seen in the fossil record which supposedly represents 540 million years of animal suffering and death. It provides snapshots of a world often full of thorns and thistles. In this view, Adam's sin could not have been the ultimate cause of universal corruption. As a historical event, his disobedience occurred long after corruption was present. But according to 6-day creation, Adam's sin precedes God's curse on the creation. The suffering and death of animals came as a result of Adam's disobedience, not prior to it. Thorns and thistles were a part of the curse, not before it. This is what Paul affirms in Romans 8:21. It is what Reformed theology has always affirmed: Adam was given dominion over the entire creation at the beginning; when he sinned, the entire creation was subjected to corruption as a consequence of its unique relationship to him.

3. The Pattern of Creation/Fall/Redemption Culminates in the New Creation

If the universe contained death and corruption that wasn't the result of Adam's sin, what does that mean for Jesus's redemption of both man and creation. It is only the chronology of 6-day creation that provides the historical framework for this pattern to have meaning. If the original creation was not good, or if the Fall did not transform that creation into something evil, then what is the real nature of our redemption? And what is the real potential of the new creation? For the bookends of creation to match, they must be mirrors of each other. This is only possible with 6-day creation.

4. Scripture Must be Used to Interpret Scripture

Whether it is Moses connecting creation week with a normal week in the fourth commandment; or Isaiah affirming God created man at the same time He created the heavens and the earth; or Jesus explaining the global destruction of the Flood in light of His second coming; or Luke tracing the history of the world through a single genealogy; or Paul relating the work of Adam to the work of Christ; or Peter showing the relationship between the creation, global flood, and judgment to come, there is only one historical sequence that consistently fits: 6-day creation.

5. Essential Doctrines are Related to History

If there really was a global flood, that changes everything. If a man really rose from the dead, that changes everything. Paul establishes the necessary connection between the events of history and Christian doctrine in 1 Corinthians 15. Peter does the same in 2 Peter 3 with creation, the flood, and the final judgment. It is only within the historical framework of 6-day creation that all these events cohere to the fabric of time.

For instance, if the thick fossil-bearing rock layers are the result of a global flood, they are a physical reminder of God's global judgment on the earth in the past—as well as in the future. If, however, one adopts the conventional chronology, those huge layers are merely a testimony to millions of years. God's judgment is erased from the earth—and perhaps overlooked in the future.

VI. The Strengths of a Straight, Ordinary Reading

There is such a thing as the perspicuity of Scripture. It was written to be understood. How is the average man or woman supposed to understand some of the complicated interpretations put forward of the Creation account? It is crystal clear that Genesis is speaking of literal days. It's nonsensical that God would give a historical account that would only be correctly interpreted in the turn of the 20th century!

VII. The earth and the cosmos can look old and still be young

Believing in a young earth is not akin to believing in a flat earth. The clear reading of the text of Gen. 1 indicates that God created *a functioning universe*. He created fruit trees with fruit, chickens before the egg, and Adam as a physically mature adult. Of course the creation is going to look old!

VIII. Summary and Conclusion

A clear, normal reading of Genesis 1-11 indicates that God created the earth in six 24 hour days, there was a world-wide catastrophic flood, the genealogies were meant to be chronological, and a real dispersion of peoples occurred at Babel. The rest of Scripture gives testimony that these were historical events.

XI. Select Bibliography

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