

CHAPTER 13

BUT WHAT ABOUT . . . ?

QUESTIONS CHRISTIANS ASK REGARDING INTERPRETING SCRIPTURE

Among the many views of origins none are free of theological or scientific challenges. All face certain difficult questions that must be pondered. To help you think through some of the key issues, we've put together a list of questions that Christians often ask about origins. Some of the questions have no simple answers, and we know that the answers we suggest won't satisfy everyone. In some cases, we ourselves aren't completely satisfied with the answers we suggest, but they offer ideas that we've found helpful as we've worked through these issues. They represent the best we can offer at this time.

1. Since the Bible tells us how God made the world, why do we need to listen to science?

God created nature and God inspired Scripture. Both are revelations from God that have something to teach us. Many Bible passages such as Psalm 19 point to God's revelation in the natural world. According to the Belgic Confession (Art. 2),

We know [God] by two means: First, by the creation, preservation, and government of the universe, since that universe is before our eyes like a beautiful book in which all creatures, great and small, are as letters to make us ponder the invisible things of God. . . . Second, he makes himself known to us more openly by his holy and divine Word. . . ."

The synod of the Christian Reformed Church described it this way: "In both creation and Scripture God addresses us with full authority." (See Appendix A, pp. 246-250)

Because they are both revelations from God, nature and Scripture can not conflict with each other. Conflict comes at the level of human interpretation of one or both revelations. If someone says, "The Bible trumps science," what they are really saying is that their human interpretation of the Bible trumps a scientific interpretation of nature.

2. Haven't Christians always believed in a young earth and a six-day creation?

Yes, that was the most common view in pre-scientific times, but it was not the only view. Even before modern science a few theologians had offered other interpretations of Genesis 1 and the meaning of the word "day." As science developed, many additional interpretations were suggested.

About 100 years ago old earth views—mainly the Day-Age and Gap Interpretations of Genesis 1—were very common among leaders of fundamentalist churches. Since then the scientific evidence for great age has grown tremendously.

As in Galileo's day God sometimes uses the book of nature to point us toward better interpretations of the book of Scripture. As Galileo discovered evidence in nature that the earth orbited the sun, it caused him and others to reevaluate the interpretation of Bible verses that say the earth is fixed in place and cannot be moved.

3. Is it ever appropriate to change one's interpretation of Scripture to match science?

It can be a real temptation to change our interpretation of Scripture simply to match the current scientific theory, but this should not be the approach of any Christian. Rather, the goal of Christians should be to find the *best* interpretation of Scripture. At times God uses life experiences from outside the Bible, including scientific discoveries in the natural world, to prompt us to reconsider what the best interpretation is. To find that best interpretation, we do not rely on science; we rely on good theology and good principles of biblical interpretation. Sometimes, after applying good principles of interpretation, more than one interpretation seems theologically valid. In such cases, especially if the biblical passage is talking about the natural world, it can be appropriate to use insights from science to help decide between these valid interpretations, especially if the biblical passage is talking about the natural world.

One important principle of interpretation is to consider what the passage meant to the original audience. For the Hebrew nation in Old Testament times, surrounded by pagan cultures, Genesis 1 was not a scientific lesson about whether the earth moved or even whether plants were created before the sun. Rather, it was a powerful proclamation of God, the God of Abraham, as the one sovereign Creator in opposition to the many gods of the pagan creation myths. Understanding this original context leads many Christians today to conclude that Genesis 1 was never meant to teach us science and that the church should not look to it for answers about the *how* and *when* of creation but rather for the *who* and *why* of creation. This interpretation of Genesis 1 was prompted in part by scientific discoveries, but it is driven and guided by good biblical scholarship.

4. Isn't a non-literal interpretation of Genesis 1 just a slippery slope for denying the resurrection?

Someone once said, "The problem with 'slippery slope' arguments is that once you believe one of them, you end up believing them all." More seriously, what Christians desire is a consistent guideline for interpretation that applies to all of Scripture.

One consistent guideline could be to interpret all of Scripture literally, to say that every passage from Genesis 1 to the gospels to Revelation is literally true. The problem is that virtually no one succeeds in following this guideline. For example, most Christians don't insist that the earth is fixed in space even though Psalm 93:1 says, "The world is firmly established; it cannot be moved." Christians know that the Bible was originally written to people living centuries ago who knew nothing of modern science. Christians also know that the Bible contains many kinds of literature, including metaphors, parables, and poetry, and that these affect the interpretation.

Another consistent guideline could be to interpret none of Scripture as literal history but merely as stories with spiritual meaning. Christians don't do this either because some of the Bible clearly was written as historical accounts of real events. Moreover, our faith rests on the literal truth of Jesus' death and resurrection.

A better consistent guideline that biblical scholars have advocated for centuries is to consider how the message of each passage was heard by the first audience, taking into account the genre of literature and the original cultural context. Because each passage is dealt with on its own terms, we need not fear a slippery slope. In the gospels the resurrection of Jesus is presented as an eyewitness account of a real event. That's clearly how the original audience heard it, and modern Christians do the same. But the genre of Genesis 1 is different.

The text is organized thematically, with parallelism and repetition, specifically to speak against the gods of the pagan cultures surrounding the ancient Hebrews.

5. If Genesis 1 should be understood literally, what is the firmament created on day two?

The creation of the firmament is described in Genesis 1:6-8 (see “Genesis 1:6-8 from Five English Translations” on this website). A completely literal interpretation of Genesis 1 implies a flat earth with a solid domed firmament holding back the waters above the sky. Other translations and interpretations of “firmament”—such as that God created a gaseous transparent atmosphere—twist the meaning of the Hebrew words beyond their original literal meaning. A literal interpretation of the days as 24-hour periods, combined with a non-literal interpretation of firmament, is at best a semi-literal interpretation of Genesis 1. (Some Christians have suggested that a literal solid firmament was created during the creation week and later destroyed during Noah’s flood; the problem with this interpretation is that many Old Testament passages speak of a solid firmament still in place long after the flood; see “Ancient Near East Cosmology in the Bible” on this website.)

From archaeological evidence we know that the Egyptians and Babylonians believed in a flat earth with a solid sky dome. The Old Testament passages that refer to a firmament show that the Israelites shared this same physical picture of the earth. This suggests that God inspired the human authors of the Old Testament to write in terms of a physical picture of the world that the original audience knew and would understand. Because Genesis 1 and the creation myths of the Egyptians and Babylonians share similar physical pictures of the world, this serves to highlight their religious differences. While the Egyptians and Babylonians had separate gods for land, ocean, air, and firmament, Genesis 1 proclaims that these are mere physical structures, all created and governed by the one true God.

6. Why didn’t God just tell us about the Big Bang and evolution in Genesis?

God could have told us many things in Scripture about the natural world, but he didn’t. God could have told us that the earth moves around the sun, but God chose not to correct the ancient view of a stationary, flat earth. God could have told us that water evaporates, condenses, and forms rain, but God chose not to correct the ancient view that an ocean of water exists above a solid firmament dome above the sky. God didn’t need to teach the original audience about modern astronomy, geology, meteorology, or biology in order to convey his message. In fact, if God had tried to teach those modern scientific concepts, it would have baffled the ancient peoples completely and distracted them from the theological message. God graciously accommodated himself to them, as he does to us. Then, as now, God meets us where we are.

Biblical scholars talk about God’s accommodation to our human limitations. They also remind us that Scripture is a progressive revelation. God does not teach everything all at once. Some truths about creation are not taught in Genesis 1 but only revealed later in the Bible, such as the role of Christ in the creation of the world (John 1, Col. 1). God clearly teaches us the most important truths about creation in Scripture, but God seems to have left the *how* and the *when* for us to discover by studying his revelation in nature.

7. Is it better if we can make the events of Genesis 1 line up with what science says, or if the message of Genesis 1 is independent of what science says?

Concordist interpretations of Genesis 1 try to make the events in Genesis 1 happen in the same sequence as current scientific evidence. It’s exciting to find places where the Hebrew phrases seem to match up with the latest scientific research papers since this seems to confirm both the Bible and science. There is a risk, however, that the biblical interpretation has to change every time science changes, and that the Hebrew words may be twisted to make them mean things they never meant to the original audience.

For these reasons some Christians advocate non-concordist interpretations of Genesis 1 that are independent of current scientific theories. These interpretations emphasize that Genesis 1 teaches about God the Creator, not about the exact sequence of events that God used to create the world. In non-concordists interpretations, the teachings of Genesis 1 are independent of what science learns and independent of how science changes. The risk for non-concordists is to interpret every Bible verse that appears to disagree with modern science as figurative, without first studying the text.

For both concordists and non-concordists, these risks can be avoided by focusing on what the best biblical scholarship has to say about the passage, instead of how the passage fits with science. Good principles of biblical interpretation are helpful guides to good interpretation, in particular the principle of determining what the passage meant in its original literary, cultural, and historical context, *before* deciding what it means for us today.