



DISCOVERY SERIES

# THE GENESIS ACCOUNT OF CREATION

DEFUSING THE CONTROVERSY

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## *Defusing The Controversy*

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**D**o fossils provide evidence that the earth has been around for millions of years? Could a catastrophic flood have thrown off the conclusions of scientists? Where do the remains of long-extinct creatures fit in the biblical account of creation?

People who are alike in their desire to find the intended meaning of the first chapters of Genesis have come up with different answers to these questions. The resulting controversy has polarized those who are equally sincere in their desire to honestly interpret the Bible and scientific data.

This booklet by Dean Ohlman is offered with the prayer that it will help us to respect one another in our differences, while affirming together that the Genesis account of creation is true.

*Martin R. De Haan II*

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# FOSSILS AND THE SEARCH FOR TRUTH

Packing in their tools, scientific instruments, and lunch, Professor Jeffrey Greenberg and his geology students work up a sweat reaching their target rockface in South Dakota's Black Hills. As a part of their degree program, they've been spending several midsummer weeks studying this jagged mountain upthrust near the western edge of America's great prairie. Getting out into the field like this is the joy of a geologist's life.

As a boy, Greenberg, like most kids, had a fascination with rocks—but his curiosity led to a career! Jeff has had a lifelong desire to understand the story of the earth he believes is being told by the soil, rock strata, and fossilized plant and animal remains that usually

go unnoticed beneath our feet.

There's another fact about Jeff that's important for us to understand. In addition to being a man of science, he is a man of faith who trusts that the Genesis account of creation is true. Jeff believes that there is no real contradiction between the biblical account of creation and the story revealed by the remains of past life and geologic action that lie within the various rock layers as a record of the earth's history. They speak of the same events, but in two different languages: *divinely inspired words* about the creation and *humanly interpreted data* from the creation. Correlating such dissimilar renditions of truth is a tough task.

Because Jeff is a scientist who embraces the worldview of the Bible, he often finds himself surrounded by people who

have opposing worldviews. On one hand, he works with many scientists who do not share his Christian faith. When he seeks information of fossil finds or geological formations, he is likely to consult with a paleontologist, a paleobotanist, a paleozoologist, or others who specialize in ancient life (*paleo* is a Greek prefix that means “ancient” or “prehistoric”). Many of these colleagues embrace a worldview that rejects much of what Genesis both declares and implies about the origin of the cosmos.

On the other hand, Jeff also interacts with scholars who agree with him that the Genesis creation account is true, but disagree with his view that the earth is billions of years old. Many of them believe that the biblical account implies a cosmos that is several thousand rather

than millions of years old.

How does someone like Dr. Greenberg handle the controversy? More important, how do any of us live honestly and faithfully in the middle of so much ambiguity and disagreement?

In the following pages, we will attempt to honor the truthfulness of the Genesis account of creation while also acknowledging the controversy over what geology, biology, and physics appear to be telling us. Our focus will not be on what people of faith disagree over, but rather on the most important question: *What can we all affirm about the truthfulness of the Genesis record of creation?*

How can people of the Bible unite around an issue that too often divides us? While standing apart from those who refuse to believe in a Creator, can we stand together on those

affirmations that, down through church history, have been regarded as the necessary and essential implications of the Genesis account?

## **GOD'S TWO BOOKS: NATURE AND THE BIBLE**

**T**heologians have historically categorized the Bible and nature as “two books,” which when read side by side combine to reveal the God of creation. The first book, comprised of the inspired Scriptures of the Jewish and Christian faith, is called “special revelation.” Its combined influence extends all over the world and stands at the heart of Western culture, making the Bible the most widely translated, circulated, and studied book in history. The Scriptures are considered

*special*, in part, because if God had not chosen human writers who were inspired by the Spirit of truth to disclose this unique and specific knowledge, we would not be aware of it.

The second of God's two revelations is the book of nature, termed “general revelation.” This is the implied record about our Creator that is discovered in the natural world around us. It is considered *general* in that it is a disclosure of reality that has been generally available to all people throughout the ages. It showcases the handiwork of God in the creation, and it serves as the record of His direct and indirect actions in earth and human history.

So, according to the Bible, God reveals Himself not only through the inspired words of Scripture, but also through the book of nature. The apostle Paul wrote, “Since the creation of

the world [the Creator's] invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead" (Rom. 1:20).

The Hebrew author of Psalm 19 expressed a similar observation when he wrote, "The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament shows His handiwork. Day unto day utters speech, and night unto night reveals knowledge. There is no speech nor language where their voice is not heard. Their line has gone out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world" (vv.1-4).

General revelation, then, which is readable to anyone willing to look, makes known God's glory (splendor and riches), His handiwork (creativity), His everlasting power (including His moral perfection and His

capacity to control and alter natural forces), and His divine nature (realities that show He is worthy of our worship). Together these disclosures demonstrate that the natural world contains a vast collection of good gifts that reveal to us a great deal of truth about the personhood, intelligence, and character of our Creator. The creation not only shouts "God," it declares, "He is powerful, wise, and wonderful!"

**Reading Both Books.** Science, at its best, is an attempt to read and understand the book of nature (or God's works). But at its worst, science takes its finite and materially limited findings about nature and turns it into a naturalistic faith and philosophy that ignores or denies an infinite and materially unlimited supernatural Creator.

As a result of its naturalistic focus and

because of the ascendancy of Darwinism within the scientific community, science has often been dominated by agnostics or atheists—even though a majority of scientists might admit some level of faith in a creator God. Before Darwin, however, it was the dominant belief in a Creator separate from His creation that actually gave rise to the sciences, and Christians were in the majority. In fact, it was belief in a rational, intelligently planned, and orderly creation that went a long way toward making modern science possible. Many of the pioneers of science—Kepler, Bacon, Newton, Pascal, Faraday, and others—were devout believers of the Bible who considered both the supernatural and natural revelations to be witnesses of the truth about God and His creation.

In an oral essay on

National Public Radio, Joseph Loconte pointed out that “too many skeptics have forgotten the massive historical debt they owe to the Jewish and Christian belief in an orderly cosmos. They cast religion as the enemy of science and progress, when in fact it was the religious [biblical] worldview that helped launch the scientific revolution over three centuries ago.”

Scientists of past generations had no problem studying the quantifiable facts of general revelation (nature) while accepting the truthfulness and authority of the Creator’s special revelation (the Scriptures). More than a few scientists and great thinkers of the past have walked in the tradition of men like Moses, David, and John the Baptist who found, in nature and in the wilderness, a sanctuary where the books of God’s

special and general revelation spoke in eloquent harmony.

### **The Problem Of Reconciling Both Books.**

In our day, many have concluded that special and general revelation are not in agreement when it comes to the age and origin of the world. The vestiges of long-extinct life forms, for instance, have caused many to wonder if such artifacts found in the natural world are in conflict with the record of the Bible.

A significant difficulty with fossilized remains has to do with their apparent age. By the assumptions and methods of modern science, these fossils are considered to be millions of years old. While some students of the Bible see no conflict between faith in divine creation and belief in an ancient earth, others think that a proper reading of the Bible will not allow belief in

an earth more than 6,000 to 10,000 years old. Many with this conviction say that the problem with modern science is that it uses uniform assumptions that do not account for the kind of cataclysmic changes that would have occurred from an event like a worldwide flood.

For young-earth advocates, modern science's estimates of geological time (earth history) and apparent astronomical time (cosmic history) often seem to place God's two revelations in opposition to each other. So if you believe they really do conflict, you have to choose to believe the Bible over science—or attempt to explain away the scientific evidence for a much older creation.

The disagreement, therefore, is not just between creationists on one side and naturalistic evolutionists on the other. The conflict

extends to Bible scholars who accept the truth of the Genesis account of creation but disagree on how the early chapters of Genesis should be interpreted. Sometimes the disagreements become intense, with both sides accusing the other of not being faithful to the revelation of Scripture or to the revelation of the natural world.

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*What's most important is what we can all hold to be true and essential in the Genesis account of creation.*

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With this conflict in view, let's see if it's possible to affirm the truthfulness of the Genesis account in a way that makes our differences far less divisive.

## **WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO SAY, "THE GENESIS ACCOUNT IS TRUE"?**

The disagreement among Bible scholars about how to explain the appearance of the great age of the earth is not the most significant issue. What's most important is what we can all hold to be true and essential in the Genesis account of creation. It's far more imperative for followers of Christ to agree that along with the evidence from nature . . .

### **I. Genesis Affirms The Existence Of God.**

When we declare that the Genesis account of creation is true, we're saying we believe that the cosmos owes its material existence to an eternal, nonmaterial, personal Spirit. The first words of the Bible are, "In

the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen. 1:1). Moses must have written these words somewhere en route from Egypt to Canaan. He had seen the evidence of God’s supernatural power in a burning bush that wasn’t consumed. He had witnessed the supernatural events of the Hebrew exodus. And then he had experienced the special revelation of God in his direct encounter with Him on Mt. Sinai. Moses certainly would have had reason to accept without question the Holy Spirit’s revelation to him that “in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.”

This affirmation, however, is opposed to the worldview of naturalism that dominates in modern scientific institutions. Philosophical naturalism, which appears to be the presupposition of most

scientists, does not acknowledge God or a supernatural origin for the creation. It takes for granted that the material world is all that exists. This view was summed up by modern scientist Carl Sagan in his popular *Cosmos* series: “The Cosmos is all that is or ever was or ever will be.”

## **2. Genesis Affirms The Power Of God.**

When we declare that the Genesis account of creation is true, we’re saying we believe that by the power of His eternal word and wisdom, God spoke the material world into existence. By the word of His mouth, God brought something out of nothing, order out of formlessness, and light out of darkness.

The rest of the Bible repeats this creation theme. The songbook of Israel declares, “By the word of the Lord the heavens were made . . . He spoke, and it was

done” (Ps. 33:6,9). This affirmation is in contrast to the naturalistic worldview that the universe and all it contains, being natural and material, could not have a supernatural and spiritual origin.

**3. Genesis Affirms The Personhood Of God.** When we declare that the Genesis account of creation is true, we’re saying we believe that the cosmos has its source in a living deity, a divine Person who is good, loving, and merciful, and that the original creation provided evidence of those personal characteristics. The beauty and utility of the natural world have their origin in their Creator’s capacity for intelligent and loving intention. The original living things on the earth were good, in part, because they reflected the knowledge, wisdom, and infinite genius of our Creator. God’s individual character is

the source of all that is beneficial and beautiful.

Moses reflected on this personal involvement of the Creator with His creation when he said, “God saw everything that He had made, and indeed it was very good” (Gen. 1:31). Later David declared, “The Lord is gracious and full of compassion, slow to anger and great in mercy. The Lord is good to all, and His tender mercies are over all His works” (Ps. 145:8-9).

This belief in an infinite, personal Creator is in contrast to the naturalistic worldview that doesn’t recognize a creator but claims that what we call personhood is the product of purposeless evolution. According to naturalism, no mind could have had a function in the creation of the material world. Personal attributes like goodness, love, and willfulness could not have had a role in the

origin and development of all things, nor is a personal God involved in creation's maintenance and continuance.

**4. Genesis Affirms The Purposefulness Of God.** When we declare that the Genesis account of creation is true, we're saying we believe that the order of our material world has its source in the purpose and plan of an all-wise and all-powerful Creator. By the design and loving intent of God, the astronomical features of the universe, as well as the oceans, land, and atmosphere of the earth were formed. The Creator progressively invested His genius in the formation of the elements, plants, and animals of the natural world and established their interdependencies. By His willful and purposeful plan, God created all life-forms and enabled each of them to reproduce "according

to its kind" (Gen. 1:24).

The book of God's special revelation explains what we see around us: Nature's mathematical precision and operation is the result of God's purposeful and intelligent design. "He has made the earth by His power, He has established the world by His wisdom, and has stretched out the heavens at His discretion" (Jer. 10:12). It was this great awareness that inspired the songwriter of Israel to declare, "O Lord, how manifold are Your works! In wisdom You have made them all. The earth is full of Your possessions" (Ps. 104:24).

This belief that the abundance of life on earth is inherently valuable, meaningful, and purposeful is in radical contrast to the naturalistic worldview, which states that the existence of the cosmos is accidental and that the

features of the earth, including life, are merely the unintended and unplanned result of matter plus time plus chance.

### **5. Genesis Affirms The Sustaining Providence Of God.**

When we declare that the Genesis account of creation is true, we're saying that the triune God constantly oversees and sustains the creation and continues to grant life to all living things.

After singing to the One who laid the foundations of the earth, the psalmist celebrated the sustaining work of the Creator when he wrote:

*He sends the springs into the valleys; they flow among the hills. They give drink to every beast of the field; the wild donkeys quench their thirst. By them the birds of the heavens have their home; they sing among the branches. He waters*

*the hills from His upper chambers; the earth is satisfied with the fruit of Your works. He causes the grass to grow for the cattle, and vegetation for the service of man, that he may bring forth food from the earth . . . . These all wait for You, that You may give them their food in due season. . . . You hide Your face, they are troubled; You take away their breath, they die and return to their dust. You send forth Your Spirit, they are created; and You renew the face of the earth (Ps. 104:10-14,27,29-30).*

This belief in a creating God who also sustains His creation by the word of His mouth is in contrast to the naturalistic worldview that fundamental natural laws and mathematical principles of unknown origin sustain and maintain the integrity of the universe. That no deity is required for either

energy or matter to exist is a fundamental presupposition of philosophical naturalism.

### **6. Genesis Affirms That God Made Man And Woman In His Likeness.**

When we declare that the Genesis account of creation is true, we're saying we believe that the personhood of man and woman has its origin in a personal Creator who made us in His own image. To crown His creation, God took the nonliving matter of the earth to create a living man. Then, to provide man with a companion and complement that would assure the perpetuation of the race, He took living tissue from the man to create a woman. The Bible calls this original human pair Adam and Eve.

The book of God's special revelation says, "So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them"

(Gen. 1:27); "and the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being" (Gen. 2:7); "then the rib which the Lord God had taken from man He made into a woman" (Gen. 2:22).

This belief that of all God's creatures only man and woman were made in God's likeness is in contrast to the naturalistic worldview, which emphasizes that mankind is merely the product of unguided evolution and that mankind has no special nature related directly to the personhood or loving intention of a supernatural Creator. In the view of naturalism, people are merely the most evolved of animals and have no special relationship to a personal God.

### **7. Genesis Affirms That We Were Made For Relationships.**

When we declare that the

Genesis account of creation is true, we're saying we believe that the relationships we enjoy with all creation have their origin in a God who is eternally relational (the Trinity). The result of God's purposeful creation was a series of relationships that explain much about the meaning of life.

Not only did God create people, He entered into a personal relationship with them. In the beginning, He was in *fellowship* with Adam and Eve and walked with them in the Garden of Eden (Gen. 3:8).

The relationship of God to the earth was *ownership*. The people of Israel declared their acceptance of this claim when they sang, "The earth is the Lord's, and all its fullness, the world and those who dwell therein" (Ps. 24:1).

The relationship of mankind to the earth was *stewardship*. From the first days of man's life on earth,

he understood that his responsibility was to care for the earth that his Maker entrusted to him: "The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to tend and keep it" (Gen. 2:15).

This belief that we were made for relationships that have their origin in our triune Creator is in contrast to the naturalistic worldview that does not acknowledge God. Naturalism denies the existence of any interpersonal or authoritative relationships or responsibilities aside from those necessitated by evolution.

## **8. Genesis Affirms That Disorder Is The Result Of A Rebellion.**

When we declare that the Genesis account of creation is true, we're saying we believe that there was an original rebellion in the unseen spirit world. This revolt was carried over into

the material world by a sinful spirit who persuaded the first man and woman to disregard their Creator's terms for the perpetuation of human life in harmony with His purposes. This disobedience resulted in the spiritual and eventual physical death of Adam and Eve. It also had a negative effect on the rest of the creation.

To remind the human family of its fallen condition, God added consequences to the human rebellion. Other judgments followed, many of which changed the nature of life on earth and distorted the original relationships. According to Genesis, many of the problems that burden the natural world have their origin in God's decision to add struggle and pain to the life of His creatures as a sort of severe mercy. These judgments, which confirmed that we could find fulfillment only in proper relationship

to God, can be seen in the biblical descriptions of what happened in the fall (Gen. 3:1-7), the curse (Gen. 3:16-19), the flood (Gen. 6-9), and the tower of Babel (Gen. 11:1-9).

The belief that much of our suffering and hardship is the result of human rebellion and our Creator's loving discipline is in contrast to the naturalistic worldview, which holds that until the advent of modern man all changes on the earth were unrelated to purposeful and intelligent activity—unless from some extraterrestrial natural intelligence other than God.

### **9. Genesis Affirms God's Desire To Rescue What Has Been Lost.**

When we declare that the Genesis account of creation is true, we're saying we believe that after the spiritual fall of our first parents, the experience of human sin and death created problems that

people could not solve on their own (Gen. 3:15; Rev. 13:8).

Throughout the rest of the Bible, we read the record of our Creator's loving pursuit of a lost and fallen humanity. This redemption theme runs throughout the Old and New Testaments and is fulfilled in the most inexpressible and miraculous act of intervention. The New Testament summarizes this redemptive rescue:

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made. . . . He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him. He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him. But as*

*many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name: who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God. And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth (Jn. 1:1-3,10-14).*

This belief that God personally appeared on earth and intervened to rescue us from sin and death is in contrast to the naturalistic worldview that all people, like all animals, will eventually die, decompose, and be gone forever—that nothing within the human being survives death except our chemical components, which will be recycled naturally to perpetuate life and its evolution.

## **10. Genesis Affirms God's Ability To Restore What Has Been Lost.**

When we declare that the Genesis account of creation is true, we're saying we believe in a God who is powerful and merciful enough to bring about the eventual restoration, renewal, and reunification of the entire creation. Even though the Genesis creation account gives us only a fleeting foreshadow of God's redemptive purposes, this prefiguration is the beginning of a great story that ends with the abode of God the Father and reign of God the Son on the earth as it is pictured in the final two chapters of the book of Revelation. The rest of the story assures us that the paradise lost by Adam and Eve will be regained.

The apostle Peter proclaimed:

*Repent therefore and be*

*converted, that your sins may be blotted out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that He may send Jesus Christ, who was preached to you before, whom heaven must receive until the times of restoration of all things, which God has spoken by the mouth of all His holy prophets since the world began (Acts 3:19-21; see also Isa. 11:6-9, Rom. 8:19-23, and Eph. 1:10).*

The belief that God will eventually restore all that has been lost is in contrast to the naturalistic worldview that recognizes no God and no Savior for threatened humanity. Naturalism asserts that there is no future hope for the individual person, just a general hope for a humanity that will survive only by doing what it can to assure the "progress" of evolution. This is in spite of the conclusion of renowned

evolutionist Michael Ruse who insists that, “Evolution is going nowhere—and rather slowly at that” (*Taking Darwin Seriously*, 1986, p.203).

## **SOME KEY IMPLICATIONS OF THE GENESIS ACCOUNT**

Those who accept the Genesis account of creation do so with the conviction that the book of God’s general revelation also tells the story of a Designer and Creator of inexpressible intelligence, wisdom, and power. This conclusion brings some additional implications:

**I. Naturalistic Explanations For The Origin Of Life Are Not Adequate.** Those who recognize the beauty, purposefulness, and power of the Genesis account have reason to reject as

inadequate any evolutionary explanations for the origin of mankind that deny an intelligent, loving, good, and superintending Creator who is the origin of everything our senses perceive. Michael Polanyi, one of the 20th century’s great scientific philosophers, created a disturbance in the halls of academia by declaring in 1958: “The book of Genesis and its great pictorial illustrations, like the frescoes of Michelangelo, remain a far more intelligent account of the nature and origin of the universe than the representation of the world as a chance collocation of atoms” (*Personal Knowledge*, 1958, p.284).

Students of Scripture often feel that the realities of creation make naturalistic explanations more fanciful than the biblical affirmations.

The findings of science still give us no proof and

little evidence that truly “simple” life-forms could develop into the kind of complexity and diversity we see in the world around us. Consider the following: the strong genetic resistance to change found among living things; the unfathomable amount of nonmaterial information required to organize and maintain even elementary life functions; the overwhelming evidence of a universe fine-tuned for the existence of life on our lone planet; and the absence of evidence for anything truly “simple” in the cosmos. Those factors currently stand opposed to the basic naturalistic explanation of life’s origins that no intelligence and deliberation stand behind the reality we know. Wherever science reaches with its most sophisticated instruments, one still finds awesome complexity and profound mystery.

## **2. Unanswered Questions Are To Be Expected And Welcomed.**

Once we understand that the cosmos has been created by an eternal, infinite, loving Creator, who also took the initiative to communicate to us through His two books, we can accept the mystery of what He has chosen *not* to tell us.

For the honest person who desires to see consensus between the special and general revelations, this can create tension. Such tension, however, does not have to hinder the quest for understanding. Actually, it can empower it. Since both nature and the Scriptures are from the mind and hand of God who is “from everlasting” (Ps. 93:2), we can enjoy pursuing and pondering what is currently unknown. No fact arising from scientific study should

threaten the faith of the follower of Christ, because He is the Author of both books. To be sure, mankind's natural curiosity is strong evidence for the fact that people are made in the image of God—who may well delight in every one of our discoveries about Him and His works.

**3. Abuse Of God's Creation Is Not Acceptable.** From the beginning, it was obvious that this natural world was a treasure entrusted by the Creator to those who bore His likeness. So it's clearly more important to our Creator to honor Him in our care and use of what He gave us than to articulate opinions that create divisions over what He chose *not* to tell us. It's our wonderful responsibility to be humble students and faithful stewards of God's handiwork. Those who accept the Genesis account

have so many reasons to be among the world's most ardent "earthkeepers."

## SO WHY THE CONTROVERSY?

In the last half of the 20th century, a number of evangelical Christians and organizations came to believe that to maintain the integrity of Scripture, the 6 creation days must be considered standard solar days. To honor the Scriptures and resist the influence of philosophical naturalism, they believe it's important to question the prevailing geological understanding that the earth is billions of years old. By emphasizing the global nature of the flood in the days of Noah, they reason that such a catastrophic event would distort any scientific measurements that assume more gradual and uniform variances in

the geologic record of the earth. They argue that true orthodoxy requires us to believe that the days of creation were literal, 24-hour days. For many who hold this view, these conclusions are a matter of deep conviction. They reason that if the first chapters of Genesis are not read as scientifically specific, the rest of the historical narrative would be seen as little more than a spiritualized narrative that has little relationship to literal reality.

Other evangelicals, however, remain convinced that the first chapters of Genesis are a rich historical account that accurately—but generally—reflects what God did over long periods of ancient history. These old-earth creationists are convinced that the opening words of Genesis express an inspired creation narrative that is a grand, intelligent, and beautiful apologetic for

the divine inspiration of the Bible. Instead of concluding that evidence for an ancient earth was created by a catastrophic flood, this group agrees with many theologians

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***Some reason that if the first chapters of Genesis are not read as scientifically specific, the rest of the historical narrative would be seen as little more than a spiritualized narrative that has little relationship to literal reality.***

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of past generations who believed that the earth is millions of years old—and that such a belief is not at all inconsistent with the Scriptures.

This view, widely held throughout church history,

is summarized by Henry Thiessen of the Wheaton College Graduate School. In his *Lectures In Systematic Theology* (1949, Eerdmans), he concurred with William G. T. Shedd in his *Dogmatic Theology* (1889, Scribners):

Was there a long or short period between the original creation in verse 1 [of Genesis] and the 6 days of creation in the rest of the chapter? Shedd says: “The doctrine of an immense time, prior to the 6 creative days, was a common view among the fathers and schoolmen” (Vol. I, p.474). The first creative act occurred in the dateless past, and between it and the work of the 6 days there is ample room for all the geologic ages. The interval may have run into thousands or even into millions of years. . . . Are the 6 days to be thought of as long

periods or as 6 literal days? Shedd says, speaking generally, “The patristic and medieval exegesis makes them to be long periods, not days of 24 hours. The latter interpretation has prevailed only in the modern church” (Vol. I, p.475). We derive no help in the interpretation from the term *day*; for it is used in various ways in the Bible (p.164).

Thiessen then quotes several passages and names theologians and scientists who held this view in his day. He concludes:

All of these point out the wonderful harmony of the account in Genesis and the findings of geology (p.165).

Other conservative scholars who have argued for the “pictorial summary” view of the Genesis account of creation include some of the greatest theologians of the

past 150 years: Lewis Sperry Chafer of Dallas Theological Seminary, Charles Feinberg of Talbot Theological Seminary, James Orr of Trinity College, Alfred Edersheim of Oxford, Charles Hodge of Princeton Theological Seminary, and Augustus Strong of Rochester Theological Seminary (when Princeton and Rochester were evangelical).

Because there is a lack of consensus among those who maintain a high view of Scripture, this is one of those areas where humble and honest students, scholars, and laymen on all sides would do well to pursue the truth without judging the motives or faithfulness of those whose convictions remain within the probable or possible implications of Scripture. Agreement on what it means to say that the Genesis account of origins is true should be our focus.

## QUESTIONS ABOUT THE GENESIS CREATION ACCOUNT

Let's look at some questions that often arise whenever the Genesis account of creation is discussed.

**According to the Bible, how old is the earth?** We don't know. The Bible doesn't give us that information. But throughout the centuries, devout believers have pondered the age of the earth. Many thought that all one had to do to determine the age of the earth biblically was to apply simple math and some logical deductions to the genealogies of Genesis 4, 5, 10, and 11. But a problem is created by the limitations of the language. The word *begot* used in our English Bible to indicate the

paternal line between generations does not always mean father to son. It often refers to the great-great-grandfather (or any number of “greats”) of the named individual, with the in-between (and apparently less significant) progenitors unnamed. So there is no accurate way to measure the generations back from Abraham to Adam.

Yet while the Bible doesn't say how young the earth is, it also doesn't say that it is as old as modern cosmological and geological studies indicate. Conflicting evidence has compelled some Bible scholars to suggest that the earth would obviously have been created with the appearance of age. They believe that since most living things would have been created in a mature state and had to appear to have grown, so also the nonliving elements upon which they depend for life

would have had to show apparent age. Distant galaxies would appear to have been transmitting light for millions of years. The earth's crust would appear to indicate “ancient” sedimentation, volcanic activity, erosion, decomposition, and chemical reactions.

That reasoning is considered implausible by many others who are equally convinced that a normal analysis of the creation must acknowledge the evidence of great age. They will point out that there are problems in saying that a “correct” interpretation of the 6 days of the Genesis creation requires us to hold that those days were 24-hour periods. They will say, for example, that the first 3 days passed before the sun, moon, and stars were even created (Gen. 1:14-19). They also point out that while an

earth created with the appearance of age would have to demonstrate evidence of long-running natural processes, it would not have to contain fossils of divinely fabricated living creatures.

In either case, it's important to note that the Bible doesn't say how old or how young the earth is. It doesn't say whether thousands or millions of years lie between the lines of sacred Scripture. While we might wish otherwise, the Bible doesn't directly tell us how to interpret the enormous appearance of age that seems to be reflected in the book of God's general revelation. But the Bible does give us pause by implying that some scientific data could be skewed by God's acts of judgment (the fall and the flood) that had a physical impact upon the creation.

Because of the different ways we interpret such

evidence, it's not surprising that there are differences of opinion about how to read God's two books in relationship to each other.

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Dr. James Sawyer of Western Seminary has pointed out that when the International Council On Biblical Inerrancy was formed in 1978, "the founding membership held over 30 discrete positions with reference to the interpretation of Genesis 1. Only one of these positions involved a 6-day recent

creation.” Apparently, most of those on the council felt that the book of God’s words did not demand that the days of creation be considered standard 24-hour days—or that no time elapsed between the days.

Many committed Christian scholars continue to debate this issue. We have plenty of reason, therefore, to allow for an honest difference of opinion and conviction on this issue. There’s no need for bitter debate when attempting to explain why God’s two books appear at times to be in conflict. The important thing is to consider it all with a humble spirit. As Dr. Sawyer explains, when we cannot distinguish between our understanding of the truth and the truth itself, we are boastfully claiming that “we have, at least on this issue, the complete understanding of God Himself.”

Further, genuine humility would also demand that there be as much room for our misunderstanding

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the message of general revelation as there is for our failure to understand the full meaning of special revelation—the Bible. Both revelations undoubtedly present aspects of reality well beyond the grasp of human reasoning and experimentation.

**Shouldn’t the Genesis account of creation be read literally?** A significant feature of the controversy over the age of the earth as it is understood from the

first chapter of Genesis is the principle of historical-grammatical interpretation that is so foundational to historic orthodoxy. The aim of the historical-grammatical method is to discover the meaning of the passage as the original author would have intended, and what the original hearers would have understood.

Those who hold to a young-earth view say they are reading the account “literally” and are therefore more in line with belief in biblical reliability, a cardinal conviction of evangelical Christianity. Because they read the Genesis 1 creation account as describing events that took place over a period of 6 successive 24-hour days, they see any attempt to read more time into the process as opposing the Word of God.

Those theologians who believe in an earth that is billions of years old (the view of most contemporary

geologists) are often just as committed to the reliability of the Scriptures. But they are likely to point out, as Henry Virkler does in his book on the principles and process of biblical interpretation: “As much distortion of the author’s meaning results from interpreting a literal statement figuratively as from interpreting a figurative statement literally” (*Hermeneutics: Principles And Processes Of Biblical Interpretation*, 1981, p.28). They see a need to take the conclusions of geology seriously and believe that the account of creation in Genesis 1 and 2 allows acceptance of evidence for an exceedingly old earth.

Down through the years of church history, scholars with a high view of Scripture have disagreed among themselves whether or not the language of the creation account was intended to be

read as a stylized literary narrative or as a scientifically specific description.

**Can someone believe the Bible and still believe in evolution?**

It depends on what is meant by “believing in evolution.” It’s important to understand that the word *evolution* merely means “to change” or “to develop.” It would be a mistake to limit the word *evolution* only to the contemporary naturalistic scheme, which holds that all of life came about through the unplanned and undirected process of organisms progressing through billions of years from simple nonliving molecules to mankind.

From beginning to end, the Bible declares that all cosmic forces and elements are the handiwork of a divine Artist who was intimately involved in creating man. Someone, then, could not

accept the naturalistic claim that the creation process was God-less and also believe that the Genesis account of creation is true. If the Creator is a good, loving, and sovereign God, nothing in His creation takes place without His personal oversight. The God who attends the death of a sparrow certainly would have attended its creation. If the biblical account of creation is true, what appears to the philosophical naturalist to be the result of mere chance is only a human perception, not a fact.

Those who have closely examined God’s general revelation recognize that the characteristics of many living creatures do change over time (like many of the fascinating creatures of the Galapagos Islands studied by Charles Darwin). Those who have complete confidence in the Bible would conclude that

God created them with the capacity to adapt to a changing environment. This is a form of evolution. These adaptations that Darwin and other scientists have observed over the years are

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sometimes called “micro-evolution”: small-scale changes that may actually produce new species (new forms of the same creature that do not generally breed with the old forms).

So, while the Bible might easily allow for micro-evolution, it’s more difficult to see how the Genesis narrative could be suggesting a God-directed process that extends over

billions of years from molecules to man. Such a large-scale “self-creating” process is what many call “macro-evolution,” and it is this comprehensive scheme that the general public typically understands to be evolution.

Theistic evolutionists, however, consider the Genesis creation account to be a divinely inspired pictorial overview, not a scientifically specific description. And they believe that macro-evolution has occurred. But they also believe that it is a God-designed process just like all the other natural processes God conceived for the development and perpetuation of life. They firmly reject the naturalistic suggestion that evolution occurred without the presence and care of an overseeing Creator. Theistic evolutionists don’t believe that natural selection could

create anything without supernatural attention. They believe that evolution as it was articulated by Darwin is an awesome natural process established by God, just like the dozens of other processes God instituted for man's survival—the water cycle, the carbon cycle, photosynthesis, plant germination, reproduction, and so forth. And to be fair to Darwin, at the end of his book *The Origin Of Species*, he himself attributed to God nature's capacity to progress from molecules to man. He believed that evolution worked in accord with "laws impressed on matter by the Creator."

Although those who accept the "billions of years" state of affairs do so without direct support from the special revelation of God, they are convinced they are reading the God-directed general revelation more accurately and faithfully

than those who reject the belief that the cosmos is ancient and that all of life, including that of mankind, came from a common ancestor.

Many renowned evangelical theologians over the centuries, from Augustine to B. B. Warfield to J. I. Packer, have believed that a long and gradual creation process directed by a loving and superintending Creator is not contrary to the Genesis account of creation. Packer, author of the Christian classic *Knowing God*, made this assertion: "I believe in the inerrancy of Scripture . . . but I cannot see that anything Scripture says, in the first chapters of Genesis or elsewhere, bears on the biological theory of evolution one way or the other" (*The Evangelical Anglican Identity Problem*, 1978, p.5).

Views like Packer's highlight how important it is

for Christians who disagree on the matter of origins and the meaning of the Genesis account to do so in grace and love without smearing each other with accusations of unfaithfulness to either of God's two books. Because of such differences among committed followers of Christ, it will certainly remain divisive and detrimental to the cause of Christ for the church to make the *process* of divine creation, rather than the *fact* of divine creation, a test of Christian orthodoxy.

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## LIVING IN TWO WORLDS

When Professor Greenberg and his geology students return from their studies in the Black Hills, they go their separate ways to different residences and churches. Some journey along I-80 and pass through the "Thornton Deposit," where on each side of the highway steep walls of rock drop 200 feet into an enormous limestone quarry. The pit is merely a dent in the top layer of what most geologists believe is an ancient saltwater reef that extends down almost a mile into the earth's crust. This formation is composed primarily of the remains of small sea creatures that are similar to organisms we find today in the earth's shallow oceans. By today's rate of procreation, death, and sedimentation, however,

this sea would have had to exist undisturbed by major upheavals for about 20 million years.

While this phenomenon convinces most Christian geologists and paleontologists that the earth is truly millions of years old, others continue to hold that such formations—found all over the world—could have been created by hydraulic forces and sedimentation processes like those they assume would have occurred in a cataclysmic flood like the one described in Genesis 6–9.

Those different perspectives bring us back to where we began. How does someone like Professor Greenberg live within these two worlds? More important, how do any of us live honestly and faithfully in the middle of such uncertainty and disagreement?

One answer is found in

our being as honest as we can with the messages given to us by God's two books. Both books declare with their own forms of eloquence the power and wisdom of the Creator. Both books demonstrate that it is God who has made us and everything else. Yet both stop short of giving us final answers about many questions of time and process. In these matters, we must live faithfully, graciously, and humbly with our differences. What we

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