

A brief look at the “Hermeneutics of Genesis 1-3”

1: Introduction:

Considering the economy of writing, in not much more than a single page in the Bible, the number of foundational profound ideas in Genesis one is truly amazing. The ideas of God as creator, a designer of tremendous ability, that God is an orderly God, that God is a person, even more than one person, that God is relational, of His awesome power, that at His command such events can take place, of the special place of man, that man is in God's image, are all conveyed. Genesis one is truly an astonishingly elegant and economical piece of writing.

Of the many different views that are held by sincere Bible believing Christians concerning the first eleven chapters of Genesis, and perhaps particularly the first three, the really central question is: How much should we read these chapters as literal history and how much interpretation should be applied? Within this question perhaps lie three others: What clues are contained within the text as to how they should be approached: ie within the normal rules of Bible interpretation, what are the indications as to how these chapters should be approached? Secondly, to what extent is it reasonable and Godly to allow scientific understanding and insight to determine the way in which we should interpret scripture, particularly these chapters? There is then a third question: What essentially is the purpose of Genesis 1-3, what is essentially being communicated to us? - are these chapters intended to be definitive science, and literal history, or are they intended to set the theological scene of man's relationship with God, man's creation in the image of God and the subsequent fall, this being done in the context of space and time? ie, where is the emphasis of intentionality in this writing?

As with any book, the opening chapters form a foundation to the whole book. Here the scene is set for what will follow¹. We cannot as Bible believing Christians select what we will believe and disregard other passages which are difficult. If we do then we move towards that tradition of liberal Christianity which so affected large sections of the church during the last century. We therefore need to understand how we should approach these foundational chapters of the book which we hold to be God's Word to us for all of this age.

An essay of this length can only indicate the main issues and indicate various avenues that the enthusiastic enquirer might follow if wanting to gain a deeper understanding. Libraries of books are generated on these topics, and the purpose here is to summarize the main arguments and save the reader much pain by giving a brief overview!

2: Basic approaches to the Bible and the styles of Bible writing:

2.1: Inerrancy v. Inspiration:

Within Evangelicalism, there are essentially two basic approaches to the scripture, which then give rise to 'families' of approaches within each. Essentially these are: "Inerrancy" -

¹ Greg Haslam makes this point very clearly in his talk to the Keswick convention, see Bib.

that the Bible is the complete Word of God to all believers. It is His complete revelation to us and is without error. This approach is much favoured in the USA, and this probably is the reason why most “Young Earth Creationist” Science has its roots there, though we shall see that this is also true of Australia. The other basic approach is “Inspiration” - that the Bible is God’s Word to us, transmitted by human agents who were inspired by the Spirit of God. This is the position taken by most evangelical theological institutions in the UK and Europe as a whole. The difference between these two positions can be rather subtle at the point of division! Many sincere “Inspirationists” would not allow that there are any errors in the scripture, and most “Inerrant” believers, believe the Bible to be inspired!

The purpose here is not to plead for one position over the other, simply to make the reader aware of just one of the basic theological approaches that lead to the various approaches to Genesis 1-3. Let’s try to draw out the subtle difference by reference to 2.Peter 3:5²: *By God’s word the heavens existed and the earth was formed out of water and by water...* The Inspirationist will ask the question as to whether Peter knew he was writing scripture when he wrote a pastoral letter to a few churches under his care and the view will tend to be that he wrote as a Godly man inspired by the Spirit. The question arises: Is this inerrant scientific language from the mouth of God, or is it a Godly man who deeply loves and knows the Lord, powerfully anointed by God, speaking according to the light that he has? No-one is suggesting that Peter is speaking error, but this point only arises when scientific authenticity is placed on texts that may not have been written that way. The inerrant view will of course take the line that this scripture will be proved to be literally correct in some way at some point, and that God was so watching over His word when it was written that it will be without error. The inspirationist view may well lean more to the view that Peter as a man full of the Spirit was not intending to write scientific insights but was working from the light he had, to make the plea to his audience for God as creator.

This slight difference is just one of many influencing the two different ways of approaching the early chapters of Genesis. The “Inerrant View” will tend to take the early chapters of Genesis as literal history wherever the text allows, and the “Inspired View” will tend to be more willing to engage in a wider possibility of interpretation, especially in the light of scientific discovery. The Inspiration view will tend to look more at the underlining meaning of the text and its historical context. Whilst also seeking those things, the inerrant view will tend to put more emphasis on the legal literacy of each detail wherever that is possible, and where difficulties arise as a result of the literalism, to try to explain that in a legal and forensic way.

The high view of the inerrancy of scripture has given rise to the branch of science called “Creationist Science”, which is essentially “Young Earth” science³, practiced by Bible believing Christians seeking to illustrate by scientific discovery that the Genesis account is essentially reliable when taken as literally as the text will allow⁴. There is however a large body of scientists who do not take this view, who are sincere Bible believing Christians, believing in Creation, but essentially engaged in a rather more mainstream branch of science, who take the other view that Genesis 1-3 should be interpreted in terms of what is

² We are aware that there has been dispute about the authorship of 2:Peter from the early centuries of the church. Here however, the point being made is not affected by this discussion.

³ The reason for the term “Young Earth” will be explained below. It arises from the particular literalist view of Genesis, which when viewing the six days as literal 24 hour days, rolling the first two verses of Gen 1 into ‘day 1’, and then working with the genealogies of Genesis and Luke, date the creation of the whole cosmos as about 4,000 BC.

⁴ This is dealt with elsewhere in this work. See the essay entitled “A Critique of Young Earth Creationism”.

intended in terms of essential meaning, but not always to be read as literal history in all respects of detail. The idea might be somewhat imperfectly stated as the kind of truth that is contained in a parable. A Parable is truth in all the meaning of that word, but is a means of conveying truth, without being legally literal in the details of the telling. Needless to say there are many shades of opinion within these two positions, and many shades between them. Like most things in this world, there are many shades between black and white!

The danger in 'Inerrancy' is that at its extreme, the church can become inflexible and dogmatic, lacking in love and understanding and somewhat judgmental. The danger of 'Inspiration' is that the church begins to compromise truth and to be unable to discern where interpretation should end and dogma begin. At this extreme, issues of church and public morality become relativistic and open to discussion where actually a straightforward reading of the words of scripture would settle the issue. A careful walking between these extremes is called for and this is the job of the 5-fold ministry of Ephesians 4:11-13 speaking into the church. Whilst these dangers do not directly impinge upon the subject of this essay, an awareness of the difficulties that arise in issues of this complexity help us to avoid simplistic and unnecessary dogma, whilst at the same time avoiding unwarranted license in dealing with scripture. This issue is only one of several affecting the ways in which these early chapters are approached.

2.2: Types of writing and their hermeneutics

The 40 or so authors of the 66 books of the Bible written over a period of some 1,500 years adopt a variety of styles and these then tend to be categorized as follows: Clearly there are history books, such as 1 and 2 Kings. Then there are poetic books such as Psalms and Song of Songs. There are then Prophetic books, such as the OT prophets and Revelation, and there are allegorical writings, contained within prophetic books, such as the beast in Revelation, but also within rather more straightforward historical books such as the parables of Jesus in the gospels. There might be other divisions and subdivisions, but for our purposes the above will suffice.

Normally poetic books are assumed to be open to interpretation. For instance, we interpret the idea that the "Trees and the Hills will skip for joy". Very few would insist that this should have a literal interpretation. On the other hand, history is normally written in a particular style of Hebrew in the OT and Greek in the New. This would normally be taken as straightforward narrative, and would not normally be expected to be interpreted, excepting that the purpose of the telling the story may be to convey a deeper truth. When it comes to prophetic writing, some parts are written in a poetic style and use language needing interpretation, and other parts are more directive and are normally written in a more direct prose style. Sometimes however directive prophecy is written in a more poetic style and does require some interpretation. Normally we do not have any difficulty knowing which is which. Where there is more difficulty we resort to a good commentary, usually one which is from the theological framework within which we most comfortably work.

At this stage it is necessary to make a statement, which is generally accepted as true across all the spectrum of belief: that it is impossible to approach the Bible without developing a hermeneutic. That is that we must have a framework of understanding within which we will read, and into which we will interpret any passages which are not absolutely obviously literal. Indeed that very decision as to what requires interpretation and what does not is determined by our own current hermeneutic. This framework will develop as we

move though our Christian lives according to our developing knowledge and experience. It is also very clearly developed by the fellowship to which we belong and the body of teaching that comes from the front.

The purpose of this essay is to help us to understand the context of the various views that are held on the first three chapters of Genesis, and to help us to come to a sensible and well thought out view of our own. It is not the purpose of this paper to tell the reader what he should believe, but to set out the various positions, enabling a little understanding to be reached, and where relevant to set out the range of options that might be held and still to be God-honoring and Biblical.

The question for us is which way we should read Genesis 1-3.

3: What kind of writing is Genesis 1-3?

We do not know the author of Genesis. Normally it is attributed to Moses, but this is tradition rather than provable fact. Even if Moses were the author, it is equally possible that he used "source material". This clearly happened in the writing of the gospels, where Luke says that he "thoroughly researched these things". Generally it is accepted that Luke was using Mark's gospel as source material, since so much of this gospel is identical in wording to that of the earlier Mark. Luke then adds other material which he obtained from other sources. All this was done under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, as 2.Timothy 3:16 dictates.

If the author of Genesis was indeed using source material as is widely thought possible, though not proven, then Genesis 1 might be an example of one of the earliest pieces of writing in the world, being written some time soon after the invention of writing which took place in the middle East in Neolithic times. Indeed some scholars have suggested that chapters one and two are about the right length each to be taken from very early clay tablets⁵. If this is the case, then we need to consider the type of culture into which these tablets were written. It was certainly not the same culture as our present Western culture. In some ways this is our first difficulty: A text is written into a culture which will tend to read it in the same way that it was written, the framework of understanding behind both the writing and the reading, normally having some common features. In making this point it is not suggested that because they are written into an ancient culture they are deficient, rather that they should not be read as if they were written into a modern culture alone. In our own culture we normally take documents at face value unless told otherwise, and in other cultures, this legal and forensic style of writing is not so much the norm, but picture language and allegory is often used and understood to be used. It is important that the reader understands why this point is being made. This also is not a plea that allegory is the right approach necessarily, simply that to miss this point about our modern culture will tend to rule elements of allegory out, when this possibility ought to be on the table for discussion.

If source material is a possibility, so is tradition⁶. The third possibility is prophetic, as coming from the writer's own walk with God. In other words, if Moses were the author, then they could his own prophecy. Any of those is possible. Whichever approach might be

⁵ This idea is expanded in Victor Pearce *Who was Adam*, p21

⁶ This is the term that is used to describe something that is a story handed down orally.

right, these early chapters of Genesis were written into all cultures at all times, and needed to be simple enough and clear enough to be understood by all cultures, non-scientific and scientific, and all educational standards across the whole world for all time and all ages, including our own. From this point of view they are among the most excellent documents to have ever been published! Their elegance, simplicity of language, and easily memorisable structure are unsurpassed, especially when considering the profound nature of the subject.

So having painfully briefly indicated that there are cultural issues to consider, let us consider what type of writing this might be: We need to understand the way that the word 'History' is normally used. It normally refers to events of the past that can be constructed from the testimony of observers present at the time, including documentation concerning the event, and where relevant, either forensic evidence or archaeological evidence. The important issue is the ability to verify and compare sources to get the most accurate account, including the most appropriate editorial perspective. We normally use the word 'Prophecy' to refer to writings that have their source in God, transmitted to us via a human agent. Whilst, prophecy normally concerns the present and the future, dealing with the past is not unknown.

Genesis One is unique among Bible writing in that it is not 'History' in the normally accepted use of the word, and has much more in common with prophecy, since God was the only observer, the text being transmitted via a prophet. Strictly speaking at least the first chapter of Genesis is a prophetic book, and the rule for reading prophetic writing would be the ones to apply.

Those who take a literal view of Genesis normally quote a body of Hebrew scholars who go to great length to prove that the text of Genesis One in particular is not poetic, but is in the normal style of prose of straightforward historical text. The final chapter of Dr Don De Young's book on rock dating⁷ is entirely given over to a word analysis of Genesis One proving that the text is not in poetic language but is normal prose. The reason for making this point is that poetic passages normally anticipate interpretation, whereas historical prose does not. They also quote scholars who indicate that the use of the words 'evening and morning' do indeed indicate literal days. This point is made since the word 'day' in Hebrew is used as flexibly as it is in English, ie: "In my day..." or "In that day" meaning a period of time. Obviously cognizance is made of the text that says "A thousand years in my sight are as a day, and a day is as a thousand years", and again, the scholars quoted by those who take the literal view are quoted as indicating that the text of Genesis One is written as it would be written to convey normal Earth days. Those who take this view can see no justification in the text for doing anything other than taking it at face value. This is an entirely valid view and is believed by many evangelicals wishing to honour the Lord. However as we shall see below, it is not actually possible to view chapters 1-3 literally throughout without some interpretation.

The opposing view is well set out by Denis Alexander⁸. There is agreement that these early chapters of Genesis are not "poetic". The issue among evangelicals who do not take the 'Young Earth view is: is there the possibility of allegory within this type of straightforward prose? Alexander draws attention to three areas where Jesus uses allegory in his own teaching, where the language used is so straightforward, and just as

⁷ Dr Don De Young: *Thousand not Billions*

⁸ Denis Alexander: *Creation or Evolution, Do we have to choose?*

that used in normal factual prose, that at the time He was misunderstood. The first is when He said it was necessary to be born again to see the Kingdom of God. He said it straightforwardly in the style of speech normally associated with a statement intended to be taken at face value, so much so that Nicodemus misunderstood Him. The second occasion was when He said that if the Temple could be torn down, He would rebuild it in three days. At the time this was taken seriously and was used against Him at His trial. The third occasion was when He said that if we would eat of His flesh and drink of His blood, we would never die. At the time he was taken literally, and many of His disciples left Him. It is only in the benefit of hindsight and greater understanding that we see that a statement that those who were present at the time took literally because of the language used, is seen to be a profound truth, stated allegorically. This is the main thinking that goes behind those who take a more interpretative approach. Thus we can see that their position is not an unbiblical position, simply a question of approach and an attempt to understand the original intention. A word analysis of the types of verb used cannot help us in this area.

The issue that might help us is: What is the intention of the passage? What is its main purpose? Both sides of the argument tend to agree that the passage is not primarily intended to be scientific, that the main purpose is to show God as creator, and to set the scene for His dealings with man, man's creation in God's image, the original perfection, the fall, and then the long story of God's dealing with man toward redemption in Christ. If the purpose had been a scientific description of the creation in detail, then most societies throughout history would not have understood it, and the main thrust of the Bible narrative might have been buried under a mass of detail not relevant to that purpose. That the main purpose of the text is theological and not scientific is not particularly in dispute.

The scripture does however set the narrative in space and time, and normally archaeological evidence and other external sources can corroborate it. Its existence in space and time is a major strength of the Bible over the Koran, which is not capable of corroboration outside of itself, being largely written as a closed system. So although the main purpose is to show God's dealings with man, and the creation itself is hurried through in great haste to get to these events, the fact remains that the scripture can normally be verified by physical evidence when referring to the physical world. For instance Eden is set in Geography in the text of Genesis Two, and indeed archaeology confirms that the beginning of agriculture is in that area, at roughly the right time, as is the origin of writing. Having stated however that the text is not for the primary purpose of science we need to be careful that we do not then treat it as if it were. The main issues of the text in terms of the creative and redemptive purposes of God are constant for either position, and to some extent an argument about which is correct is unnecessary. It might be useful at this stage to examine the implications, both positive and negative of the two positions, the literal and the allegorical.

4: Implications of the Literal and the Allegorical positions:

4:1: The Literal or Young Earth position:

This approach takes the narrative at face value wherever that is possible. It views the events of verses 1&2 of chapter 1 as part of Day 1. The six days are taken to be literal 24 hr days, and chapter 2 is taken to be a retelling of chapter 1 from the view point of the earth. Since we have detailed genealogies of Adam to Jesus constructed from Genesis and from Matthew and Luke, it is possible to date Adam and Eden to about 4,000 BC.

Since it is assumed on this reading that Adam was inserted into a cosmos of only 5.5 days age, the age of the Cosmos is then also deduced as being about 6,000 years. This date appears to have first been floated by an archbishop Ussher working in Ireland in the seventeenth century. Since there are some discrepancies in the genealogies and that it is acknowledged that ancient documents do not always give every member of a family line, it is normal to view the cosmos as “less than 10,000 years” old, though 6,000 years is very often the figure. The Genesis year long flood is taken as being literally world wide with only Noah and his family plus the animals in the arc surviving. A package of doctrines also flow from this position which are held as being nonnegotiable. These are that: All the world’s major species, including those extinct such as the Dinosaurs, were alive with Adam⁹. No animal could have died or suffered before the fall of man. Therefore no fossil is older than Eden. It is assumed by many young earth creationists in the companion discipline of young earth creationist science that the majority of the fossils were laid down in the Genesis flood, and that it is the flood which gives rise to most geological features in sedimentary rocks seen on the earth today.

The main problems that are normally held up against this approach are twofold: Firstly it is not possible to read chapters 1-3 without at least some interpretation which then undermines the ‘literal’ claim. To unpack this a little, the sequence of events in chapter 2 is different to that in chapter 1. There is no pluperfect “had made” in verse 2:19 in the original, only a simple past tense, so the implication is that the man is before the animals. However we explain this, it starts to become interpretation. The same is true of 2:17 *When you eat of it you shall surely die*. We know that Adam did not die for 930 years and so we take the meaning of this as spiritual death, or the beginning of a process of death. Whatever we say here, we are beginning to interpret. The same is then true of 3:14, in that we know serpents do not eat dust literally so we interpret. When we have done that which we are forced to do by the text itself, then we are no longer literal. Indeed a literal position throughout is not possible without some interpretation.

The second problem is that notwithstanding the attempts of Young Earth Creationist Science to prove this model, the majority view of serious scientific study does not back it and does not illustrate a young cosmos. As to whether it is right to use science to determine hermeneutic is another discussion. There is an irony here in fact because it is often the Young Earth proponents who are most adamant that scripture should not be held up to challenged by science¹⁰, yet it is they who are investing heavily in Creationist Science to try to verify their position. The actual fact is that since word analysis does not really help us to decide in detail whether the literal or interpretative positions are the most reliable, it probably is down to science in the sense of an honest scrutiny of the facts, to indicate the most likely verdict. For more on this issue please see the essay on this subject¹¹.

In defense of this position it must be said that it is the position that is the most coherent with the rest of scripture, most notably Exodus 20:11, which states that *in six days the Lord*

⁹ As an interesting note here: There are about 2 million species currently identified on the Earth, with perhaps another 18 million yet to be catalogued. Denis Alexander writes that 99% of creatures that have ever lived are extinct, this working from the fossil record. This means that conservatively, if no evolution of any kind is considered, then the number of species at the beginning in this scenario is at the very lowest 200 million rising to 2 billion.

¹⁰ Ken Ham in his book: *The New Answers Book* makes this point very strongly, yet the whole book is dedicated to Young Earth Creationist Science! Perhaps it depends upon which science is being discussed!

¹¹ See the essay “*A critique of Young Earth Creationism*”, by the same author.

made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. This was directly prophetic and is part of the ten commandments, which is surely viewed as one of the most reliable scriptures in the whole cannon. To take an allegorical approach, or one which allows 'picture imagery' would need to also reconcile with the other scriptures on the subject.

4:2: The not-so-literal, or allegorical approach:

Unlike 4.1 above, there is no single approach to set out here, but a series of models. Since the question is whether to read literally or to allow interpretation, these different areas where interpretation is often used are listed briefly below:

- Various 'gap-theory' models, where a long period of time is attributed to Genesis 1:1-2, and where long periods rather than days may be attributed to the six creative periods of Chapter 1.
- "Ancient Earth Creationism", where God intervened at various points during Earth's long history with specific acts of direction.
- "Intelligent Design" which is essentially "Ancient Earth", and which though new, may turn out to be a "God of the Gaps" theology brought up to date¹².
- "Theistic Evolution", where the mainstream scientific narrative is accepted, but with God as the Divine driver and inspirer.
- A purely allegorical and theological approach to Genesis 1-3 with no real relationship to space and time.

The sort of Biblical interpretations that typically arise with any interpretative theology are:

- That there is a long period of time encompassed by Genesis 1:1-2.
- That the days of Genesis 1 are long periods, and that the sort of strict chronology normally read into documents in our age do not apply in ancient eastern documents, which are more concerned with essential truths contained within the narrative, and where strict chronology often does not apply. Clearly 2 Peter 3:8¹³ is often quoted.
- The use of the verbs "Create", "Form" and "Make" of chapter 1 are often examined, to show that not all the acts of chapter 1 are strictly creation by 'fiat'. The word create is only used of the Heaven and the Earth in verse 1&2, independent life in the sea, and for man, though the man is also said to be formed from the dust of the earth. The creation of Light is perhaps a fourth category, where although the word for 'create' is not used, it would seem to be by Divine fiat and not made. Animals and man are 'made' from the dust of the ground, which gives scope for understandings other than Divine Fiat. Likewise it is the ground which produces the trees and plants, this especially being explained in Chapter 2. These ways of looking at these verses gives scope for less miraculous methods to be used, such as 'theistic evolution', and certainly 'Intelligent Design', without denigrating the power and authority of God. In other words, the point is

¹² Some explanation might be useful here. "God of the Gaps" is not an official theological position, but it arises from the tendency for those following the mainstream version of the science of origins to place the work of God into any gaps in our knowledge. The problem with this approach is that as the gaps get closed by farther research, then the space attributed to God continually shrinks until He is eventually redundant. The fear expressed by Dr Denis Alexander in his interview recorded in Nigel Bovey's *God, the Big Bang and Bunsen Burning Issues*, p103 is that Intelligent Design might go the same way.

¹³ "For with the Lord a day is like 1000 years, and 1000 years are like a day"

often made that 'miraculous' language is not used throughout the text, only at certain points.

- Comparisons to Babylonian creation myths are made, to show that points made in chapters 1-3 are often in response to and in reaction against other competing narratives of the time. For instance the relegation of the sun, moon and stars to day 4, and the non-reference to them by name is held up as being a demotion of the gods of the sun and the moon often worshipped in ancient societies, and a clear indication that they are not God.
- That the "mankind" of Chapter 1 is not the same as the man and woman of chapter 2. That there were races before Adam and Eve as indicated in Chapter 1:26, and that the Adam and Eve of Chapter 2 were Neolithic farmers who were specially called into a relationship with God, as the first "Sons of God". Adam and Eve are often viewed as a literal pair and not as 'types' but obviously the point that the Hebrew word "Adam" means "mankind" and that he was taken from the "Adamah" the "ground", or "dust" to till the "Adamah", the ground, features strongly in these ideas. This approach leads to a novel interpretation of the 'sons of God going into the daughters of men', assuming this passage to apply to 'mixed marriages' between the Godly line of Adam and the rest of the population.
- The creation of Eve is often viewed as heavily symbolic and not necessarily literal, the real issue being the "One Flesh" of marriage, confirmed by Jesus. In any event, the original text does not have the word "Rib", simply that some material was taken from Adam's side.
- The "Fall" and the trees in the garden are often interpreted without losing any of their theological significance. Approaches here vary from the trees being purely allegorical, to there being literal trees with miraculous fruit. Another idea is that the fruit was quite normal and ordinary but that it had sacramental powers, rather like ordinary bread and wine having in fact the power of life and death according to 1 Corinthians 11.
- The issue of death in the animal realm prior to the fall of Adam is often not addressed in Ancient Earth scenarios, but Denis Alexander¹⁴ explains it at length.
- The issue of the Genesis flood is often interpreted as being local in Ancient Earth scenarios, affecting the whole known world of the time, which of course is less than the whole unknown world.

To deal with these various approaches in such a brief form tends to rob them of the richness of insight which often accompanies a more detailed analysis. They are simply set out here to show the areas where interpretation is often applied.

The main problems with this approach are again twofold: Firstly, at what point do we determine where allegory stops and straightforward text begins? Great care is needed to ensure that the right understanding of scripture is maintained. Secondly, the divide in the scripture between theological and scientific is a dangerous one in that it tends in the direction of the division of truth. The Bible is set in space and time, and is a holistic view of life. On the other hand, to insist upon a young age for the universe which is troublesome scientifically is also to separate the scripture from space and time, so this is somewhat of a neutral argument.

4.3: Further general discussions:

¹⁴ Denis Alexander : *Creation and Evolution, do we have to choose?*

The Young Earth insistence that no animal could suffer or die before the fall of man is a central doctrine to their arguments, and is therefore a doctrine which ought to be examined. It is an extrapolation of the spiritual death that comes upon man at the fall, of which the spiritual sense is again confirmed by John 6:51, and by Romans 5:17. When Jesus says that those who believe will never die, we know that those who are in Christ will physically die, unless raptured, so we read these verses as referring to spiritual life. That Adam himself might not have physically died without sinning should be considered alongside the concept that the tree of life was also in the garden capable of giving eternal physical life, a fact confirmed by Genesis 3:22. If Adam could not die without first sinning, what was the purpose of the tree of life, and why was a guard then set on it so that Adam and Eve could no longer reach it? Maybe we will not know this side of heaven! Pain was certainly in the Eden world, as Genesis 3:16 confirms *I will greatly increase your pain in childbirth*. The only verse that could link animal death and suffering into the fall of man is a tenuous one, being Romans 8:20-22, but this is far more likely to be referring to the curse on the land as a result of the fall. It is not the purpose here to annul this doctrine, merely to point out that the ground upon which it is built is not as firm as might be assumed.

All points of view have difficulty explaining the herbivore aspect of Genesis 1:30 when clearly creatures with attack and defense mechanisms appear in the fossil record going back, according to the ancient earth view, millions of years. Neither can these features be explained in terms of evolution following the fall, since there has not been enough time for such features as the silk glands of the spider or the venomous bite of the snake to appear in a few thousand years. This aspect is therefore a weakness for the Young Earth Creationists too. Of course there exists the possibility that the vegetarian allusion here is symbolic of peace, as *'the lion will eat straw like the ox'* of Isaiah 11:7 may be also. These matters are not simple.

In the end the issue is: What do we mean by "Good"? If God is good, does that mean the same as a human in the 21st Century might mean if describing someone as good? If the creation is "good", and mankind in his original form is "very good", what does that actually mean? Does it mean: Made in the image of a God, whose goodness needs to be understood and might not be the same as human concepts of goodness, or does it mean 'good' in the sense that no harm could ever come and no suffering could be permitted? These questions have a great bearing on our understanding of a God of judgment, the God of the old testament, and ultimate views concerning hell. The reason for including this idea is to try to stop us being trivial and too light in our understanding of these words.

5: The reasons for the discussion: What are the motives?

5.1: Science:

At the present time, the motivator for the lively discussion is almost certainly the seeming collision of the mainstream scientific narrative with the Biblical account. The 'driver' of secular world science since about the 16th century has been to find rational explanations for the origin of the universe and man which preclude the intervention of the Divine. Prior to this time, physics and metaphysics were studied together and there was no division between them. Theology was viewed on the same basis as the study of the natural world. Now it is not admissible to explain any scientific fact by reference to the miraculous in the mainstream of world science. This actually leads to some good and some bad results. Richard Dawkins' stated concern is that when we acknowledge the Divine we give up looking for the natural laws. If we did not look for natural causes then we would not know

that they were there. Was the parting of the Red Sea natural or miraculous? God caused a strong east wind to blow all night which held back the waters. On the natural side, this then has a natural explanation. On the Divine side, who caused the wind at such an opportune time? It is a question of faith. The world-wide scientific community exercises faith that the world is rational and explainable, and that it always obeys a set of discoverable laws. This is what drives scientific exploration. A Biblical explanation, which on the face of the reading requires a series of miraculous interventions is therefore anathema to this philosophy¹⁵.

On the other side however, it is not true to say that Young Earth science is not equally driven by a set of dogmatic rules. For them, the answer must be 6,000 years for the age of the cosmos, regardless. This significantly reduces their ability to follow the facts where they lead. One applauds the fact that this approach is being explored, because to explore the Biblical record against a different approach to science is good scholarship, but it is a pity that they are starting with the answer and working back, when their answer might not be right and may be too simplistic. To reappraise the facts with a little more flexibility would lead to more reliable result.

Generally, scientists who are believers and are in the mainstream, do not see a conflict between science and religion. Some of these are in the 'Intelligent Design' movement, and many are in theistic evolution, or broadly believe one of the gap theories or ancient earth creationism. For the most part they rejoice at the wonder of creation and the enormous complexity of life and the cosmos. Needless to say however, most of these Christians will resort to some level of interpretation of Genesis.

5:2: In history:

The church has never been totally united on these issues. It might be surprising to note that of the early church fathers, neither Augustine of Hippo in the 5th Century nor Origen in the 3rd believed that the six days of Genesis 1 should be read literally. They came to this view on a reading of the text, and given the period were clearly not driven by a scientific understanding. In fact the prevailing world view at their time came from the ancient Greeks and was a 'steady state' theory, that matter had always existed and that in that sense the universe was eternal.

The "creationist" movement that we see today appears to be fairly recent. It received a great boost in the 1960's with the beginning of "Creationist Science".

6: Where do the worlds meet?

Given that there is such division of views concerning the various creation or origins theories, where can we unite? Where can we all agree? If we see Genesis 1-3 as literal or as to some extent imagery, with some latitude for interpretation, is there a narrative to these chapters, an underlining meaning upon which we can unite? Surely, from whichever position we come, we will look for the deeper meaning in the events of these chapters, which form the common ground of understanding.

To try to set these out briefly:

¹⁵ Interestingly on this point, the discoveries of Quantum Physics have shown us for the first time that the universe may not be entirely predictable. This is what caused the great Albert Einstein to protest that "God does not play dice!"

- a) God is creator, behind the universe is Intelligence and Purpose. All is not aimless, blind and pitiless.
- b) Behind everything, lies the intention and wisdom of a God who is intrinsically good, in that goodness could not be defined any other way than by knowledge of Him. That the universe in its original form reflected and embodies this goodness.
- c) That God is an orderly God, a systematic worker.
- d) That God is a highly creative and innovative God, an artist and a designer of enormous ability.
- e) That God is a person. He thinks, wills, acts, communicates.
- f) That God is powerful. He speaks and it is done.
- g) That God is plural, yet works as one! This comes from the grammar of verse one which in essence states: 'Gods creates' the heavens and the earth. ie: That "God" is plural, but the conjugation of the verb is singular. Throughout chapter one, the royal 'we' / 'us' is used.
- h) That God is a God of mathematics and that mathematics are central to the operation of the universe. The use of sevens and multiples of sevens in chapter one are hidden from us in English, but in Hebrew there are seven words in the first verse and 14 in the second. Seven is a perfect number to God. The other numbers used are 3's and 10's. There are 10 commandments in creation. There are 3 'creation events', matter, independent free moving life and man. The word create is used 3 times for man.
- i) That God is separate from creation. In other words, pantheism is not right.
- j) That man was the high point of creation.
- k) That God is in a sense like us: He can feel, think, will and act. The scripture talks of body parts as we have.
- l) That man and the Earth are the centre of God's purpose. The Cosmos only appears very briefly in this first chapter.

7: Conclusions:

It might be helpful to break with the "3rd person"/passive tense rule here and write personally. I have great respect for the literalists. I think that their motivation is to uphold the Word of God over all other influences and opinions. They are doing this in the face of the growing secular tendency to dismiss anything to do with faith and to uphold "science" as if it were God. The science of Young Earth Creationism is in reaction to the onslaught of secularism. There are however two great difficulties with the position: Firstly, it is dogma led in a closed system. That is, it is driven by a particular reading of scripture and no scientific fact that contradicts the presupposition that the earth and the universe are only 6,000 years old is allowed. This means that it can never really be tested or falsified. The

fact that secular science is also a closed system in that the intervention of the Divine is not taken into account, does not invalidate this problem. It is a pity that we cannot let the facts speak without restraint. Secondly, as a scientific system it is not as complete as it would tend to be presented. There are many gaps and difficulties which are dealt with in presentations very lightly.

As for theistic evolution, there are some quite strong scientific arguments in favour of this position, and 100's of thousands of Bible believers in the main stream of science believe that this explanation of origins is the correct one. It is also the position taught in most evangelical Bible colleges in the UK. I am not completely convinced about it, it seems not to fit with the idea that God made or formed creatures 'according to their kinds'. Even with interpretation, there is something fundamental about this statement, which does not seem to describe evolution. Mankind is specifically said to have been created, as were the creatures of the sea. This is not an easy one, as said elsewhere.

Intelligent Design is an attractive position, but again it does tend to rely on the "God of the Gaps" arguments, which then can tend to shrink as research fills in the gaps in the argument.

I believe that the answer lies in drawing out the basic theological foundational principles that can be seen in the text, which ever way it is read, as summarized in paragraph 6 above. Let us allow one another to be free on these matters. One day in Glory, when we see Him face to face we can ask Him, but then it may not matter very much. Our main contention here and now is to defend the truth that the Earth and the Universe did not self construct out of nothing with no-one to guide the process, as the faith of secularism commands us, but rather that *In the beginning, God created the heaven and the earth ...* It is to Him that we owe everything, our existence, this beautiful world that He created, our salvation, and our ultimate destiny in a new Heaven and a New Earth to dwell with Him eternally where there will be no more suffering and God will wipe every tear from our eyes.

Whatever the answer is in eternity, I believe that the word of God will be shown to be correct. This may not be in the way that we expect, as was the case with the disciples on the Emmaus Road who had never seen Jesus in the scriptures that they had known since childhood, but in a way which perhaps we do not expect, the scripture will be fulfilled. Amen.

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