



# A Summary of Approaches to the Interpretation of the Creation Narratives in the Early Chapters of Genesis

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**Abstract:** There are a number of different views of the creation stories held by individuals, churches and denominations, some of which are held strongly which can cause disagreement if not division. Nevertheless, when the different views are considered together in a spirit of humility it becomes obvious there is considerable overlap as well as space for different opinions to be held together in Christian fellowship. It is anticipated that this summary may be useful to individuals and churches who are seeking harmony and reconciliation rather than entrenched positions. It should help to show that certain issues need not be as divisive as imagined. Unity in big picture truths rather than dogmatism in regard to more incidental aspects will assist the healing process if such be required.

**Key words:** Creation, Genesis, Interpretation, Science

## General Introduction

The motivation for this article is at least two-fold. The author chairs Search for Truth Charitable Trust (SfT) which sponsors the international resources The God Question (TGQ). These resources are readily available in English<sup>1</sup>, in Spanish<sup>2</sup> as *La Cuestión de Dios* and in Norwegian<sup>3</sup> (sub-titles) as *Finnes Gud?* They have also been dubbed in Russian and Ukrainian and sub-titled in Mandarin. TGQ expounds three huge areas of contemporary science: The Cosmos, Life & Evolution and Mind & Consciousness – where all views are explored with atheists, theists, and scientists. There is supporting study material and, when these resources are used by individuals or groups, the question regularly – and rightly – arises is “how does all this science square with Genesis”?

Secondly, while some have been content to identify with one specific interpretation of the Genesis narrative, there is an increasing appetite for opportunities to compare a range of interpretations. The impressive exposition by Kofoed<sup>4</sup> of the hermeneutics historically employed in approaching Genesis concluded:

In addition to the need for sandboxes for scholarly discussion, we need similar arenas for lay interaction in the church. This is somewhat more challenging, of course, since, unlike organisations which usually promote one particular model or view, many churches want to create an environment that is inclusive of more than one interpretation.

This paper is an attempt to address these two situations. Synthesis rather than conflict is the aim.

In addition, many non-Christians who accept orthodox science, scientists, and lay people alike, assume that theology does not have a convincing case for the existence of a creator and that believers are mistaken and outdated. In ecclesiastical circles disagreements over these matters may assume significant importance and lead unfortunately to a conflict model of faith and science which is apparent not only within Churches but among the general public. It is important, therefore, to be aware of the serious Christian considerations that have been given to matters of faith and science particularly in terms of views about origins. This paper should be helpful to Churches or lay persons in understanding the various positions taken and also to realise that many apparently different views can be held in harmony. It may also correct fears that science somehow contradicts the Bible or that scripture is subservient to science.

Technical terminology has been avoided so that the material should be readily accessible to all. Detailed consideration such as genre, the meaning of 'days' or appearance of the tempter have been avoided although inferences will be apparent in the different views. More detail is available in the references. Detailed arguments for or against particular views have been deliberately avoided in favour of simple descriptions for comparison purposes to facilitate a reader reaching their own conclusions.

The forthcoming publication<sup>5</sup>, *Scripture, Science and The God Question*, sponsored by SfT, provides a comprehensive coverage of several creation sections in the Bible with accompanying science and study material. This paper is an expanded version of an appendix in that publication. It is offered as a simplified but broad summary of the various

approaches that Christians might take to interpreting early Genesis in the light of contemporary science.

## Preamble

One needs to approach this topic in humility with an awareness of the various ways early Genesis has been interpreted both historically and more recently. The provocative title of the book *Seven Days that Divide the World* <sup>6</sup> hints at the inherent difficulty. While there are different opinions there is also considerable agreement among different parties. All Christians basically agree that a transcendent God created the universe and the world in which we live. All ancient peoples had their various gods, and indeed some still do today, but the God revealed in Genesis is not just the God of the Hebrews (or Christians) but claims to be the only one and true God. Most would also agree that Genesis teaches about the relationship between God and humans, between humans, and between humans and the wider creation. These important truths should be celebrated above all else.

Equally, one should be careful not to read too much into the narrative. After all, by implication, the origin of the universe is virtually covered in one verse and the main creation narrative in about 30 verses in the first chapter of the Bible! It is obviously not intended to satisfy our curiosity as to the detailed processes, chronology or timescale of these colossal events and the intention is certainly not to teach about science. Rather it is a swift broad sweep of a big picture written in an ancient culture; it sets the scene for the story of the history of the people who came to be known as Israel, the special relationship with their God and the promise of blessing to all nations through

them to be ultimately fulfilled in Jesus.

Before summarising the various approaches to Genesis, it is appropriate to set the scene by reflecting on the background and characteristics of the scriptures. If this is of lesser interest the following section may be omitted.

### **The Bible: What kind of book is it and how should it be treated?**

Scripture is a product of the times in which it was written. Understanding something of the cultural background including that of the nations around can help us appreciate the language and meaning of the Biblical text. It is also worth remembering that the early Biblical writers believed the earth was flat with a dome above, waters beneath and that the earth was fixed in place so that the sun travelled around the earth and so on. The individual books of the Bible were written over many centuries, and some existed long before they were arranged within the book we know today as the Bible. It was written in different languages by dozens of authors from diverse cultural backgrounds over a period of more than a thousand years. The New Testament itself spans about one hundred years. The Bible contains different types of literature including, history, poetry, proverbs, songs, prophesy, visions, gospel, sermons, apocalyptic language and employs various features such as stories, illustrations, parables, metaphors, signs, miracles and so on. One must beware too of anthropomorphic language where human type characteristics are attributed to God. For us this is unavoidable but is quite inadequate in terms of describing the Divine or things eternal.

Thus, to understand or study the Bible we need to be alert to the type of literature and language employed. A moment's thought will make it obvious that serious

study cannot just simply take everything as strictly literal; no one does that or we might conclude that the early part of the well-loved Psalm 23 was written by a sheep! The appropriate approach is never more important than when we consider the creation accounts since the writers are attempting to use human language to describe the indescribable.

The intertestamental period between the writing of the last book of the Old Testament and the first book of the New Testament was about 400 years. It also took many years to finalise the canon of authoritative writings that comprise the Bible today. The Hebrew Scriptures were perhaps not completed until the century before Christ. The Protestant Old Testament is essentially the same as the Hebrew Scriptures accepted by the Jews albeit the order and the number of books is different. The New Testament canon was not finalised until the third or fourth century. There are other writings, broadly termed Apocrypha, considered sacred by different groups some of which are taken as canonical so that there are differences between the Protestant, Catholic, and various Orthodox canons. Although there may be difficulties in translation, the many modern versions of the Bible reflect centuries of careful scholarship and collaboration among Christians of various traditions.

The main theme of the Bible is clear especially as it develops through the New Testament. Some passages are easy to understand without detailed study, for example John 3:16 but other areas especially in the Old Testament are not so easy without some appreciation of the history and culture of the time. Nevertheless, all Scripture is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness as Paul wrote to Timothy in

2 Timothy 3:16. Paul was referring to the Hebrew scriptures but the Church Fathers included Paul's own writings in the canon so we can legitimately take this instruction to apply to our modern Bibles. See the strong claim Paul makes in Galatians 1:12. Peter also effectively endorsed Paul's letters as scripture in 2 Peter 3:15-16.

As originally written neither the OT nor the NT had chapters or verses. This is the reason the NT refers to quotations from the Old only by the name, albeit modern translations may helpfully identify the source via notes. Early readers of the NT would require to be familiar with OT books to know or find the actual place. For example, when the Gospels writers attributed a quote to David one would need to be familiar with or read about four or five OT books to identify the quote. Jewish Rabbis eventually (sixth century BCE) divided the Torah into sections to assist the weekly reading of the Law in Synagogues. In 1205 chapters were introduced by Cardinal, later Archbishop, Stephen Langdon and the first Wycliffe Bible was printed with 1189 chapters in 1382. In 1551 Robert Stephanus – a contemporary of John Calvin – published a NT with verses for the first time and in 1555 the full Bible with verses in Latin. Today we take all this for granted and a portion of scripture can be found almost instantly. Concordances would be impossible otherwise and Bible study much more difficult.

Needless to say, modern sciences such as cosmology or biology were completely unknown in Biblical times. Bearing in mind the origins of the Bible, its cultural background and the diverse types of literature therein we need to be aware and beware of our tendency to interpret the Bible from a twenty-first century perspec-

tive. This cannot be over emphasised. We are all guilty of reading our modern notions into the Biblical narrative. Many of the problems of interpretation and divergence among Christians stem from failing to realise our own in-built cultural biases or failing to take the appropriate historical and cultural background into account. Nida<sup>7</sup> gives many examples of misunderstandings among diverse communities and cultures. Similarly, the book *Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes*<sup>8</sup> is an education.

How then might these ancient texts have been intended to be understood by their early readers and how should they be understood today? These questions stretch the mind but in pondering them the following points might be helpful. It should be remembered that the early history of the Jewish people, like that of all others, was oral and eventually written down. Even when originally written down, only a minority of people were able to read the text. Nevertheless, the Bible has been shown to be a remarkable book by many reputable scholars. The language is never careless and the detail – even down to individual words – can be incredibly informative. Consider the careful use of the word 'bara' used in the creation account of Genesis 1 which only ever refers to God's activity (see later) or the reference to man being formed from dust in 2:7 or 3:19. Today, science tells us that key elements in our bodies could only have come from the product of nuclear activity in the stars; not just dust but stardust!

Although early readers of creation accounts in Scripture did not have access to the kinds of scholarship available today, we know that many Jewish Rabbis and early Church Fathers did not interpret the creation accounts in a literalistic

fashion, realising that there was a deeper more complex message being conveyed. Theologians such as Anselm and Thomas Aquinas went to great lengths to remind us that our talk about God is not straight forward and direct but analogical. How could it be otherwise since God is infinite and our minds are finite? It is regrettable then if, or when, controversy about the literal meaning of details in the creation takes precedence over a focus on the deeper meaning of the text. Similarly, it is unfortunate if interpretations of the Scripture text are so dogmatically held that they cause segmentation in the Church. Unfortunately, religious dogmatism can also alienate those outside the Church. Such a concern was expressed by Augustine:<sup>9</sup>

Usually, even a non-Christian knows something about the earth, the heavens, and the other elements of this world, about the motion and orbit of the stars and even their size and relative positions, about the predictable eclipses of the sun and moon, the cycles of the years and the seasons, about the kinds of animals, shrubs, stones, and so forth, and this knowledge he holds to as being certain from reason and experience.

Now, it is a disgraceful and dangerous thing for an infidel to hear a Christian, presumably giving the meaning of Holy Scripture, talking non-sense on these topics. The shame is not so much that an ignorant individual is derided, but that people outside the household of the faith think our sacred writers held such opinions, and, to the great loss of those for whose salvation we toil, the writers of our Scripture are criticized and rejected as unlearned men.

How then do we approach an interpretation of early Genesis in the light of

science? Many have struggled with the best way forward. Which takes precedent? For Christians it is obviously the Bible. The message of the Bible is timeless and eternal and unaffected by scientific progress or other theories, but we must be careful that we are not naïve in our understanding. Donald Mackay, Scottish neuroscientist and Christian, is often quoted since he put it well:<sup>10</sup>

...the primary function of scientific enquiry ... is neither to verify nor to add to the inspired picture, but to help us in eliminating improper ways of reading it. The scientific data God gives us can sometimes serve as his way of warning us when we are standing too close to the picture, or at the wrong angle, or with the wrong expectations, to be able to see the inspired pattern he means to convey to us.

While modern scientific concepts should not be read into scripture, they may serve as a stimulus to encourage us to understand the core biblical message and its implications. However, contemporary scientific findings must be treated seriously. These will not be expounded here as there are many more qualified authors who have contributed. For example, Harbin<sup>11</sup> has provided an excellent balanced summary of the evolutionary science background with an extended bibliography, explaining the tension points with Genesis as well as elaborating on contributions that have been offered as solutions. He concludes cautiously by quoting Augustine<sup>12</sup> who both contributed to some of the difficulty but was also perceptive in understanding the pitfalls of simplistic solutions:

In matters that are obscure and far beyond our vision, even in such as we may find treated in Holy Scripture, different interpretations are

sometimes possible without prejudice to the faith we have received. In such a case, we should not rush in headlong and so firmly take our stand on one side that, if further progress in the search of truth justly undermines this position, we too fall with it.

Such a humble and honest attitude is suitable preparation to consider different views of what is an important part of a complex library of books where the authors are said to be inspired by the Spirit of God.

## Approaches to Early Genesis

### Introduction

Some of the main approaches that have been suggested to assist understanding the early chapters of Genesis in the light of science are outlined briefly below. Some are incompatible with one another; some overlap and can be easily combined. The list is not comprehensive but does present the more common forms of interpretation. These interpretations command varying levels of support.

Two broad categories of interpretation of Genesis 1-3 are usually identified, literalist views and literary views. Within these there can be a spectrum of opinions on the role of science in interpreting the biblical text. Given the nuances that distinguish one view from another the allocation of views to one category or the other may be misleading and such a category classification is not used in what follows. The two categories can occur together where a factual literal event includes a non-literal aspect. In the parables of Jesus, it is literally true that Jesus was in Palestine and spoke in parables but there may or may not have been a man mugged on the Jericho road or a literal

good Samaritan. Nevertheless, the story of the good Samaritan is an excellent answer to the question 'Who is my neighbour?'. Similarly, early Genesis which may well contain different elements is an excellent answer to the question, 'how did the world come to be?'

No one is entirely disposed to one or other of these extremes of literal or literary interpretation. Yet when it comes to Genesis some 'literalists' consider the text to be a more reliable scientific guide to creation than the narratives provided by the sciences which study origins as part of their core agenda such as astronomy, biology and geology. Others prefer to seek an accommodation with the complementarity of the two very different but not necessarily contradictory accounts: science and scripture. A multitude of publications is available and only a few leading ones can be mentioned.

In general terms a literalist approach interprets the biblical text as purely historical. Such an approach considers that the events of creation in Genesis 1:1-2:3 are presented in the way things literally happened and the events in 2:4-3:24 are taken to be literally as recorded. On the other hand, a literary approach will interpret the text in a more symbolic/allegorical/parabolic/representative way although some will also assert historical accuracy without necessarily accepting some details as literal.

Some literary approaches date back as far as the early Church fathers who considered that details need not be interpreted in a literal fashion, but rather in some symbolic way. Many current views seek to find some accommodation with modern science both cosmologically and biologically, specifically evolution in the latter case. Perhaps not surprisingly, there are a variety of literary views which see

the Genesis texts as representing the ancient reality in a symbolic way, but all broadly accept the current consensus of orthodox science while affirming belief in a unique transcendent creator.

### Young Earth Creationism (YEC)

This interpretation assumes that the account is simply a straightforward literal description of exactly what took place. Sometimes this is described as a plain-reading or a historical-grammatical interpretation of scripture. A day is assumed to be a normal 24-hour day. When all the generations listed in Genesis are added up the argument is made that all the creation events took place in the equivalent of a normal week dating back a few thousand years ago, usually 6000 to 10000.

This makes alignment with modern cosmology very challenging if not impossible. The belief regarding Adam and Eve is that they were the biological ancestors of all humans and that there was no death before the disobedience episode in chapter 3. The phraseology “after their kind” is taken to mean each species is created separately. These beliefs rule out accommodation with any form of evolution. Many proponents of the literal view argue that the scientific understanding is mistaken and in conflict with the Biblical record. They go on to provide an alternative interpretation of, for example, geology and dating methods which allows them to align the data with their approach. Generally, this view is termed Young Earth Creationism.<sup>13</sup>

It has been suggested by Fraser<sup>14</sup> that the literal, univocal and perspicuous understanding of Genesis can only be dated to the Reformation at the earliest and did not attain its current form until the late seventeenth century. It is also a view of scripture that seems to be assum-

ed by many atheists. Henry Morris<sup>15</sup> was a key proponent of YEC, who in 1961 updated ideas from 1923 by Price,<sup>16</sup> a Seven-day Adventist, which led to the influential Creation Research Society (CRS) and later Answers in Genesis (AiG).

### Old Age Creation (OAC)

Distinct from YEC there are various approaches that are generally referred to as OAC.<sup>17</sup> These views are compatible with the timescales accepted in modern physics and geology – namely a 4.5-billion-year-old earth.

One form of accommodation involves the **Gap Creation** idea usually attributed to the Scottish Churchman Thomas Chalmers, which sees a long gap between Genesis chapter 1 verses 1 and 2 allowing for a long process such as cosmology suggests. Thereafter, some adhere to a literal 6 x 24-hour day creation period.

Others incline towards **Progressive Creation** which sees creation taking place over long periods of time but with there being progressive formation of the component parts of the universe over time. It has been suggested this may involve an input of ‘information’ on the part of the creator with the various categories of creation developing according to the new input of information.

Microevolution is usually accepted within species but not macroevolution in terms of the development of new species. Limited evolutionary development within categories of creation is accepted but there is a rejection of the neo-Darwinian view that everything developed progressively from one original source, or that humans had a common ancestor with other hominids.

A variation within this category is the **Day Age view** which broadly considers the days to be long periods of time, i.e.

Day = Age, although there are four distinct meanings of the Hebrew word 'yom' (translated 'day'). The days in Genesis are considered to be different stages of development in creation but simplified for pre-scientific communities. In this way the timescales of modern science and Scripture can be aligned. Some within OAC go as far as to find support in the text for many of the findings of modern science (termed Concordism – seeking compatibility between contemporary science and Biblical texts).

OAC has been described as a 'large tent' and includes multiple interpretations such as:

- Creation 'days' as revelatory days
- Twenty-four-hour days separated by long periods
- Creation days as a literary framework
- A time gap between Genesis 1:1 and 1:3
- Analogical or time-relative creation days
- Creation days as long time periods or 'ages'
- Any combination of these

### Evolutionary Creation<sup>18</sup>

This has also been known particularly in the UK as Theistic Evolution<sup>19</sup> although the former is preferred to avoid the comparison with atheistic evolution and to put the emphasis on creation. The organisation BioLogos, founded by Dr Francis Collins (the leader of the Human Genome project), has majored on evolutionary creation. It is one of the most common literary standpoints.

Proponents consider that both the basic beliefs of biblical Christianity and the scientific theories of cosmological, geological, and biological evolution are valid and provide complementary forms of understanding. It is accepted that the

universe is about 13.8 billion years old and the earth more than 4 billion years old, as is the view that humans appeared on earth as a result of a long process of evolution.

Generally, Adam and Eve are understood to be archetypal and the detail of the stories are taken as a means of conveying important spiritual truth rather than necessarily actual events. Some consider Adam and Eve as purely symbolic while others consider them to be historical individuals. Some suggest that these two persons might have been selected by God from other humans to be representatives of the human race with whom he would relate and communicate. It is contended that the Creator established and maintains the laws of nature, including the mechanisms inherent in evolution which, it is often argued, demonstrates purpose<sup>20</sup> and direction and is not as completely random as is often claimed.

### Message – Incident View

This contribution, an explanatory sub-set within evolutionary creation, was made by Denis Lamoureaux.<sup>21</sup> He emphasises that the Bible is not a science book and therefore does not attempt to anticipate modern science. It notes that Genesis (and indeed most of the Bible) reflects ancient cosmology and also ancient biology, with associated limitations on the recipients' ability to appreciate the complexity and inter-connectivity of living things. He suggested that by grace the Holy Spirit descended to the level of the ancient Hebrews – and the biblical author of early Genesis - and used their (incidental) ancient science level of understanding in order to reveal the central Message of Faith that God was the Creator of everything including life itself: also, that humans have a special place in that creation, being



endowed with the image of God.

Thus, God accommodates the level of the ancient knowledge and simply does not attempt to reveal in any detail how He made plants, animals ... and humans since it is not germane to the appreciation of the central message. The details which are given are considered “incidental” and not part of the “message”.

### Mythic View

Some literary scholars and theologians regard the Genesis creation narratives as myth – but usually not in a fictional sense. The word is used to convey that the details employed (in a story) reflect a greater reality. For example, John Polkinghorne<sup>22</sup> defines myth as “a truth that is so real (and so great) that it cannot be easily conveyed by normal direct textual communication.” C S Lewis placed great value on myth as a vehicle of communication in trying to comprehend eternal realities. He believed it reaches after “some transcendental reality which the forms of discursive thought cannot contain”. This also reflects what Lewis termed “metaphor”. He distinguished a form of metaphor which functions as an irreplaceable substitute for a reality, which is not accessible to the speaker in any other (i.e. more literal) way. Such forms of speech, called metaphors by Lewis pupils, cannot be “translated” into literal propositions. Rather this is the only possible way of relating to an otherwise unknown reality. There are Truths that are bigger than information. Certain Truths cannot be only factual because they are also transcendent.

### Analogical view

A somewhat similar literary view considers that the author has used the normal working week including the Sabbath as

an analogy for a creation “week” to describe the work of God in creation without implying that creation took place within a six-24-hour-day period. This is usually attributed to C. John Collins<sup>23</sup> who also termed the days anthropomorphic which some find helpful although the view also attracted some criticism.

### Cosmic Temple View

This novel idea of how to view the first few chapters of Genesis is attributed mainly to John Walton<sup>24,25</sup> and some find it a helpful concept. Walton observes that ancient peoples believed that something existed when it had a function. This is in contrast to our belief that existence is tied to material properties. Hence, he views Genesis 1 as an account of functional origins rather than an account of material origins.

Other ancient near east literature, contemporary with the writing of the Genesis account, record that temples were typically dedicated in a seven-day ceremony with the god coming to “rest” in his temple once it was complete and his/her image installed. Walton suggests that the creation descriptions in Genesis may be read in the same manner, a portrayal of God building a temple, namely the universe and earth in particular, in which he then takes up residence and rests from his labour. He also draws similarities between the cosmic temple and the Tabernacle and Solomon’s Temple suggesting the longitudinal horizontal axis of the latter two leading to the sanctuary corresponds to the vertical axis of the earth/heaven creation.

The name, cosmic, may be initially confusing and perhaps God’s earthly temple may have been a clearer, albeit less grand designation. It has been suggested that Cosmic Palace might be a better

description: Temple could convey the idea of a restriction with activity confined therein whereas a palace is a base for the king who reigns over his domain. However, temple terminology is used throughout scripture.

### Revelation View

Another suggestion is that the six days of Genesis are specific days of revelation when God revealed details of creation to the writer or his forebears. That is, these were six days when God revealed His creative work and not six days when God created the world. Wiseman<sup>26</sup> proposed this idea and pointed out that the Hebrew word ‘asah’ could be translated as ‘show’ instead of ‘make’. That translation has been criticised since ‘asah’ is more commonly rendered as make. The passages in Genesis are also compared with other ancient writings and shown to be in the form found in Babylonian stone tablets.

### Ancient Near East Worldview

A relatively recent beautifully illustrated book<sup>27</sup> by the geologist Carol Hill interprets Scripture with respect to both the scientific and Biblical evidence but from the perspective of the ancient authors. Hill takes a holistic overview integrating insights from various positions into one coherent whole. Essentially her basic premise is that the Bible in its original context is clearly intended to refer to historical events when it is considered from the worldview of the Biblical authors.

Worldview here is not to be confused with the common usage of Christian or secular worldview; rather it refers to the use of the ancient near east (ANE) worldview in terms of the language conventions employed in sacred writing (or oral tradition) together with the cultural understanding of the physical surroundings,

including what today might be termed cosmology and/or biology. Obviously, the ancients had a rather different (simpler) understanding of cosmology and biology which is reflected in their writings.

Early Genesis is understood to have been written in the normal way that such an ANE sacred text would be written. It includes repetition, parallel-construction, figurative images and figures of speech with the “days” being presented in a framework that provides a teleological order rather than a chronological or causal one. Nevertheless, it is considered to be describing historical events but in a style that may be foreign to the modern mind.

For example, the garden of Eden is considered an actual place and Adam and Eve historical persons but their creation is described in figurative language, including word plays, common to the time (dust as a symbol of mortality, the serpent motif as an adversary of humans and gods and so on). Persuasive arguments are made for the actual location of the garden of Eden, the four rivers and other details of the narrative with detailed geological substantiation to emphasise the historicity of the Biblical record. However, although using the same type of language and symbolism as other ANE texts which all had their own creation stories, the message of the Genesis creation narrative is quite radically different from other Babylonian creation stories; it emphasises monotheism with one sovereign creator as distinct from chaotic polytheism.

It is suggested the Genesis story is to be understood as primarily concerned with tracing the history of the Jewish people back via Abraham to Adam and the creator rather than with the origin of the human race in general. Adam is not viewed as the ancestor of all living but as

the spiritual ancestor and Eve not as the 'mother of all the living' (Gen. 3:20) but the *spiritual* mother of the human race. Consider Galatians 3:7-9, where it is clear that the real (spiritual) children of Abraham are those who have faith. Other pre-Adamite humans outside the garden are assumed to be made in the image of God with certain requirements or guidelines. Pre-Adamites lived, died and no doubt sinned; they may have worshipped false gods but were not judged since there was no knowledge of any law. The first command/law was addressed to Adam and together with Eve he failed, leading to a judgement of spiritual death which is thereafter applicable to all future spiritually enlightened humans.

One might ask what else changed with Adam? It was the moment in history when God decided to impart his Holy Spirit to a human being. A new world order began and a new relationship with God became possible through Adam's line which was to lead eventually to Christ. In the OT God's Spirit was restricted and imparted only for special purposes through individuals for example, Noah, Abraham, David and so on until Pentecost when the Spirit became available to all believers. With Adam came new responsibilities, a new type of death – spiritual death and a new type of life – spiritual (eternal) life. See the link in the first of the promises to the seven Churches in Rev 2: 7, which contains the same symbolism,

To him who overcomes I will give  
the right to eat from the tree of life,  
which is in the paradise of God.

Accepting modern science in terms of the age of the earth or the universe and the general idea of evolution is easily accommodated, since it is essentially a parallel explanation which is eminently compat-

ible with the evidence. Although Hill criticises other approaches, she is careful to emphasise that she is recommending the worldview as an approach to be employed, not a position to be defended in the sense that different people using the approach may reach their own alternative conclusions.

### Genealogical Ancestry

Recent contributions, particularly by Swamidass,<sup>28</sup> have sought to remove the contradictions between the widespread belief of a single pair of ancestors (Adam and Eve in the garden) and evolutionary science which indicates that human populations have never been less than a few thousand individuals. Genetic studies have tended to show that there has never been a "bottleneck" of a single pair<sup>29</sup>, although that has been questioned<sup>30</sup> albeit indicating that any genetic first pair would likely be in the distant past, c. 500000 years ago. The author's motivation is to show the compatibility between the traditional understanding of the Genesis story of Adam and Eve and contemporary science in a way that leaves maximum room for various theological positions and makes peace within the Christian community. His website emphasises the point by being termed peaceful science.

Building on earlier work<sup>31</sup>, that just a few thousand years ago many individuals must have existed who are genealogical ancestors of all present-day humans, Swamidass makes the simple suggestion that one pair of the shared ancestors of all living humans was "Adam and Eve". He shows how the contradiction between a single pair and a population can be removed if genealogical ancestors are considered rather than genetic ancestry. Obviously in Bible times there was no knowledge of genetics. Adam and Eve

could be the genealogical ancestors of all people alive today and indeed if they were dated about 6000 years ago could be the ancestors of all those alive by the time of Jesus. This is based on a relatively simple mathematical idea but fairly laborious mathematical calculations.

The key assumption is that the descendants of the first pair mixed with other humans outside the garden, the latter having developed earlier in the classical evolutionary pattern. This leaves room for the creation of the first pair *de novo* or specially selected by the creator. In fact, the analysis shows that any other pair of that vintage would also be ancestors of all living but this does not invalidate the argument. It leaves open the question of the image of God and whether it was conferred on others outside the garden initially or via future descendants. Not all descendants contribute to our genes, so Adam and Eve are probably genetic ghosts. Thus, the hypothesis is unaffected by any findings of evolutionary science including genetic studies and so cannot be disproved by that means. In a sense this sees the Biblical history and modern science, as different parallel explanations which are compatible but not contradictory. Although intriguing, Mitochondrial Eve and Y-Chromosomal Adam seem fairly irrelevant since neither imply a small population or a bottleneck and in fact M-Eve and Y-Adam are apparently well separated in time. The work of Swamidass has been succinctly summarised by Richard Buggs.<sup>32</sup> It has attracted much attention, including some criticism but has gained considerable respect among other theologians.<sup>33</sup>

Swamidass goes on to consider many other aspects of the creation narratives and several possibilities resulting in the light of his hypothesis. For example, it is

well accepted that there are two creation accounts in Genesis 1 to 2:3 and Genesis 2:4–25. Obviously, there are differences in these accounts so much so that some have even suggested they are contradictory but in fact it may help illuminate the idea of humans outside the garden.

Swamidass offers various suggestions, perhaps the most useful being that favoured by John Walton.<sup>34</sup> The first account is considered to be a broad picture of the creative activity of the earth and all that is in it. In passing it is observed that the important word ‘bara’ is used three times in verses 1, 21 and 27. ‘Bara’ is only ever used of God’s creative activity. It has often been taken to indicate creation out of nothing although it is used elsewhere in the OT without that implication. The ambiguous word ‘adam’ is sometimes considered to mean humankind (man) and at other times an individual named Adam. Consider verses 26/27 in Chapter 1:

Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea... male and female he created them,

which like most of the first account seems to encompass the whole earth in its description. A number of things follow; the garden of Eden is not in view at this point; one might conclude that it is the general account of creation which can now be investigated by observation, historical records and various branches of science; all humans both male and female are made in the image of God; at a minimum this implies they are God’s representatives on earth and in particular appointed as carers of God’s good creation. Enns<sup>35</sup> suggests that is exactly what the image of God means in Genesis, nothing more, nothing less; the question of what it means to be human is a different question.

The second account in contrast focuses in on a particular location and a specific couple, Adam and Eve, where ‘adam’ in this case refers to a particular individual. It is noted that Chapter 2:4a, “*This is the account of...*” is one of another ten similar breaks throughout the Genesis narrative, 5:1, 6:9, 10:1, 11:10, 11:27, 25:12, 25:19, 36:1, 36:9 and 37:2. These are usually assumed to start a new section. Thus, within the general creation God makes provision for a special place, Eden, where we learn of God’s intention to build a special relationship with humans. This situation proves to be temporary and can only be investigated to a rather limited extent so that we are left to interpret the second account primarily from scripture.

Hence the suggestion that Adam and Eve could well be a special *de novo* creation. Swamidass suggests there may be a similarity here with the incarnation. He further suggested that God might have had a special purpose for Adam in terms of influencing the humans outside the garden through his descendants, perhaps enlightening them in terms of their relationship to the creator, again thinking in terms of a similarity with Jesus. Some have asked, why do Adam and Eve need be *de novo* but physically made genetically similar to those who have descended from earlier forms via evolution?

Andrew Ter Ern Loke<sup>36</sup> is another author who has shown that, what he calls a literal historical interpretation of the creation narratives can be compatible with evolution. He makes the point that many evangelical Christians endorse the compatibility of evolution with the Bible including some who also affirm the historicity of the Genesis accounts in one way or another. Loke<sup>37</sup> broadly endorses Swamidass’ book but disagrees with his

suggestion that Adam was not the first image-bearer. Loke argues the pre-Adamites outside the garden, whom he describes as anatomical *Homo sapiens*, should not be considered humans in a Biblical sense. Adam then becomes the first Image-bearer and the progenitor of all humans.

Swamidass actually describes Adam and Eve and their descendants as “textual humans”. In a similar fashion John Stott<sup>38</sup> had suggested earlier that Adam and Eve could be described as the first *Homo Divinus*. Others have suggested that Adam and Eve could have been simply specially selected from a wider population<sup>39</sup> which would be consistent with how God chose Abraham, Moses, David, and many others.

Whatever way one interprets the textual detail, the encouragement is to see early Genesis and what follows as introducing Adam as the progenitor of Israel rather than emphasising the beginning of all humanity. All these ideas from Swamidass and others are given purely as suggestions and as a contribution to diffusing the idea that there need be any conflict with science or indeed between Christians of different persuasions. Peaceful science and peaceful (humble) Christians! Blessed are the peacemakers<sup>39</sup>.

### Jewish Perspectives

Jewish Rabbis have studied the OT for centuries and we can learn a great deal from their literature. It is interesting to note some comments from that source. For example, the Jewish scholar and former Chief Rabbi Lord Sacks<sup>40, 41</sup> has emphasised the danger of seeing the Genesis account of origins as attempting to represent scientific reality. He pointed out, that Genesis is not myth (fiction) or history in a conventional sense or science or even

theology. Primarily it is the story of the people who are to become Israel or later the Jews.

The passages need to be understood in relation to their overall purpose. He emphasises the first chapter of the Torah is in fact a **polemic**, a protest, against a certain way of understanding the universe. In all other ancient creation stories, the world was explained in terms of battles of the gods in their struggle for dominance. The Torah dismisses this way of thinking totally and utterly; God is a God of order and not capricious, God is good and does things that are good, man is not good and given choices chooses badly.

Rabbi Sacks makes a number of other important points. None of these is concerned with the timescale or details of the creation process. There is the sheer **paradox** of God saying, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness". The statement lies behind Jefferson's words in the American Declaration of independence, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal (and) are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights...". These truths are anything but self-evident!

We sometimes forget, when reading these words, that in Judaism *God has no image or likeness*. To make an image of God is to transgress the second of the Ten Commandments. God is free, and by making us in His image, He gave us also the power to be free. This was God's most fateful gift. Given freedom, humans misuse it as Genesis illustrates. The question Genesis seeks to answer then is not "How did the universe come into being?" but "How then shall we live?" Will we use our freedom to respect order or misuse it to create chaos? Will we honour or dishonour the image of God that lives within the human heart and mind?

Momentous ideas made the West what it is; human rights, the abolition of slavery, the equal worth of all, and justice based on the principle that right is sovereign over might. All of these ultimately derive from the statement in the first chapter of the Torah that we are made in God's image and likeness. No other text has had a greater influence on moral thought, nor has any other civilization ever held a higher vision.

### Brief Comments Related to Science

Science is – or ought to be – concerned with truth. Truth is not to be feared. Science seeks understanding from information that can be gleaned from current and past sources by many different processes. Where patterns emerge, theorems are developed to categorise behaviour which allow further explanations or predictions. It is often said that science may describe how things happen but can only say *why* things happen to a limited extent. For example, imagine you enter a room empty of people, but a kettle is boiling. You might ask the question 'Why is the kettle boiling?' The question can be answered in one way from a knowledge of chemistry and physics, but science has no way of ascertaining the agency behind the event, in this case the person and his / her purpose in switching the kettle on. That can only be answered if the person who did so reveals the reason for their action. Perhaps the answer is that he / she wanted a cup of tea.

Physical sciences are fairly mature in that they are generally well accepted. On a large scale the movements of the planets are understood and predicted by established physical laws leading, for example, to the now familiar wonders of space flight. More mundane everyday interaction events are governed by similar laws

and so on. On a smaller scale Quantum Mechanics studies the sub-atomic domain. These different theories for the different domains have proven difficult to integrate but fortunately that does not influence everyday activity.

Normally scientific progress is incremental but occasionally it can be revolutionary as, for example, when physics changed from a Steady State theory of the universe to the Big Bang origin idea (first suggested in 1927 by the Catholic priest Lemaitre and confirmed by Hubble in 1929) which is now universally accepted. Most Christians have no difficulty reconciling belief in a creator with physical sciences including cosmology, especially with its discovery that life on earth and much else besides, depends on the pinpoint accuracy of certain fine-tuned forces and constants in the universe. That fact reinforces belief in a transcendent creator.

Biology has made enormous progress in terms of understanding the complexity of life in general and the human body in particular with all the benefits of modern medicine. The theory of evolution, a matter relevant to the current discussion, is a valiant attempt to describe the development of all life on earth and there is no doubt Darwin made a brilliant contribution, largely supported by modern studies in genetics. However, it is rather more difficult to understand life systems as distinct from inanimate material systems. Arguably there is a spiritual dimension to human life that defies materialistic explanations.

From a Christian standpoint then evolution can only be a rudimentary and insufficient theory since it (understandably) ignores the metaphysical. The theory of evolution depends on a continuous series of mutations often termed "accidents" or

"mistakes", but fortuitously some of these mutations have effective outcomes. It is quite unable to take account of transcendence or the activity and input of a creator and falls short of ever fully explaining the complexity of the human condition or the most remarkable organ in the known universe, the human brain. That does not mean it is necessarily wrong, only that it is limited in what it can conclude.

Many atheists claim evolution to be an undirected mindless Godless process. On the other hand, Christians who broadly accept the framework of evolution consider it the elegant way God created life with the inbuilt potential to largely develop itself. Neither of these two views can actually be proved from science. They are interpretations or opinions based on the evidence and depend on the worldview of the observer. Theists would argue that the latter view is a more satisfactory and direct explanation of the evidence.

Thus, when one hears that 'scientists have shown' or 'scientists now know' it is fair to question how robust or comprehensive such statements can be. It is best to be aware that statements related to findings may be coloured by opinion/interpretation from the scientists concerned.

### Summary

This paper cannot fully do justice to the different views expressed and readers are encouraged to explore in more detail via the literature. Any misrepresentations herein are entirely due to the author.

Broadly one of the main differences between many of the above is between those who regard the early chapters as protohistory (a period of history constructed from culture and oral tradition before written records) written represen-

tationally but relating to real events which communicate divine revelation, on the one hand and, on the other, those who consider them communicating timeless truths in a symbolic way, rather than recounting actual historical events.

Almost all are seeking an interpretation which is compatible with contemporary science not because science is more important than scripture but rather because we have been given two books, the book of nature and the book of scripture and the Bible encourages us to learn from both. Indeed, an appreciation of science enhances our understanding of scripture and of the majesty of God.

Many detailed questions remain but hopefully a larger grander picture emerges of the activity of God in our world and Universe. Those who draw atheistic conclusions from the findings of science are free to do that but there is nothing scientific about their interpretation and their views can be easily challenged.

Two men looked out  
through prison bars  
One saw mud,  
the other stars  
(Dale Carnegie)

None of the above implies that modern science is wholly correct or cannot be criticised. Science is not static. Scientific views are open to challenge, they change and develop as more information comes to light which is normal, although development is often incremental rather than in large steps. Theological understanding can also change with time and some of the approaches described above are relatively recent. Nevertheless, broad complementarity between scripture and science is to be expected and both enhance our understanding.

It should not be overlooked that the Bible is an extraordinary book. The language seems to have been so carefully chosen that different layers of meaning and even different interpretations turn out to be remarkably compatible with information discovered much later in time even though that was not the main purpose of the author(s).

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