

# GENESIS and ORIGINS

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The interpretation of the early chapters of Genesis and its implications for Christian faith today is a controversial and emotive topic. I have been asked to address some of the issues of biblical interpretation and theology raised by the debate. Before I do so, however, let me make one thing clear. All participants in the debate, as far as I can tell, share a commitment to Jesus and his word. This means that all affirm that:

- the Bible is God's Word for us and all people;
- we have been created by a loving God to worship and serve him;
- all humans have rebelled against God and deserve his just punishment of death;
- God has acted in history to save his people;
- this reached its culmination in the person of Jesus Christ, who is true God and true human;
- he died for our sins, rose on the third day for our justification and ascended to his Father's right hand to intercede for us;
- he will return to judge the living and the dead;
- we are called to faithful discipleship on the basis of God's revelation to us by his Word and his Spirit.

On this we all agree. The debate is over our understanding of Genesis and origins. We must remember this, lest we lose perspective and treat it as a debate over matters central to our faith in Jesus Christ. It is not. Important as it is, it is no test of orthodoxy or salvation to believe or disbelieve in a particular interpretation of this portion of Scripture. So what are the issues?

Supporters of Creation Science claim that:

- (1) Genesis 1-3 presents us with an account of the early history of the cosmos;
- (2) contemporary scientific understanding of the origins of the universe & of life conflict with the biblical account;
- (3) the latter cannot be rejected *or reinterpreted*, lest we sacrifice the truth-value of Christianity, and even the gospel itself;
- (4) therefore the former must be rejected.

Other Christians, such as the fellows of the Institute for the Study of Christianity in an Age of Science & Technology (ISCAST), deny one or more of these claims.

There are many issues at stake here, such as the nature of scientific and religious truth claims and models of the interaction of faith and science, which we must leave to one side. Our focus here is on the issues of interpretation and theology that this debate raises. Let me look first at the issues of biblical interpretation.

The primary issue for evangelical interpretation of Scripture is: what does the writer use the text to say? A related question is: how do the historical & canonical context of the text influence our understanding of this? Creation scientists *assume* that the writer used the text to make clear assertions about the means that God used in creating the cosmos and life. Thus there is a direct correspondence between the words of the text and what the writer is affirming by way of those words.

Is that necessary? Not if there are better explanations of those features of the text which are normally taken to be assertions of scientific fact. Let me give an example: the 6/7-day framework. The pattern of days serves a literary function, ordering the account into two sets of three days: on days 1-3 God "divides" the cosmos (ordering the realms of existence) and on days 4-6 he populates the realms he created. Thus the framework has a clear *literary* function, and tells us important things about God and his creation. Of course this does not mean that it cannot also serve to assert that the cosmos was made in six 24-hour periods. It does mean it *need not*; it may serve to mark the writer's assertion that this is an orderly cosmos, made by an orderly and trustworthy God, and questions of what happened when are not of interest to him.

To assert that an ancient author must share our concerns fails to do justice to the historical context of the text and its significance for understanding the author's intentions. Indeed to insist that Genesis 1-3 must be taken as statements of God's means of creation is, paradoxically, to place ourselves over the text by saying it has to be read in light of *our* interests. This is *not* to say that faith and science are divorced, for they are not. Indeed a proper theological understanding of Genesis 1-3 has serious implications for science and its practice. Rather, it is to say that the understanding of their interaction put forward by Creation Science may be mistaken.

A related issue is: what factors can legitimately influence our understanding of the author's intentions? Specifically, is it legitimate to alter our interpretation of the text in light of contemporary science? It seems to me it is, as I believe Ps 24:2 and Ps 104:1-9 demonstrate. This then means that questions of the scientific plausibility of a six-day creation can modify our view of what the writer used the text to say & specifically, reinforcing the notion that the day framework has a literary rather than a strictly temporal function.

The key theological issue, I believe, is the nature of the Bible's authority and its relation to our interpretation of key texts. Creation Science equate the acceptance of the Bible's authority and trustworthiness with the acceptance of a particular (literal) interpretation of (portions of) it. This, it seems to me, is a theological category error. Evangelicals affirm that the Bible is authoritative and trustworthy in all it affirms. But this means that we must understand what it *affirms* in order to know what we are to believe and obey. The disagreement is *not* over biblical authority *per se* as Creation Science claims, but over particular interpretations of the Bible and the truthfulness and authority of those interpretations. To state that a literal understanding of Genesis is foundational to biblical faith, and to assume that this is the same as affirming that Genesis itself is foundational to biblical faith is a serious mistake. To imply that those who disagree with a particular interpretation of Genesis have rejected biblical faith is both wrong and offensive.

Furthermore, it is simply not the case that belief in evolution as the possible means God

used to create life undermines the atoning work of Christ - the argument being that evolution requires animal death and even species extinction for its operation. The death that Paul - and the writer of Genesis 3 for that matter - say entered the world with human sin is best understood as humans' being alienated from God. This, I think, is plain in Genesis 3, for the expulsion of the first humans from Eden, their alienation from God, is the fulfilment of the death penalty of Gen 2:17. The question, then, of the physical death of animals is separate. This does not mean it is of no account for Christian theology. It does mean that believing in the possibility or actuality of animal death and species extinction is not inconsistent with Paul's affirmation that death entered the world with the sin of the first human. It certainly does not undermine the saving work of Jesus.

Creation Science sets up a false antithesis: either believe our interpretation of Scripture, or disbelieve God's Word. This is not only a false antithesis, it is a dangerous one, for it forces unnecessary choices, and labels dissenters as unbelievers.

I disagree with Creation Science's interpretation of Genesis and its understanding of Scripture and science. That is of little account. What is theologically dangerous, I believe, is their denying the authenticity of the faith of those, like myself, who disagree with them. That danger must be resisted for the sake of our common commitment to Christ and his purposes.

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