

Scripture Reading for August 25 2019

Gen 1:1-2:3. (NIV)

¹ In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. ² Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.

³ And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. ⁴ God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness. ⁵ God called the light "day," and the darkness he called "night." And there was evening, and there was morning—the first day.

⁶ And God said, "Let there be a vault between the waters to separate water from water." ⁷ So God made the vault and separated the water under the vault from the water above it. And it was so. ⁸ God called the vault "sky." And there was evening, and there was morning—the second day.

⁹ And God said, "Let the water under the sky be gathered to one place, and let dry ground appear." And it was so. ¹⁰ God called the dry ground "land," and the gathered waters he called "seas." And God saw that it was good.

¹¹ Then God said, "Let the land produce vegetation: seed-bearing plants and trees on the land that bear fruit with seed in it, according to their various kinds." And it was so. ¹² The land produced vegetation: plants bearing seed according to their kinds and trees bearing fruit with seed in it according to their kinds. And God saw that it was good. ¹³ And there was evening, and there was morning—the third day.

¹⁴ And God said, "Let there be lights in the vault of the sky to separate the day from the night, and let them serve as signs to mark sacred times, and days and years, ¹⁵ and let them be lights in the vault of the sky to give light on the earth." And it was so. ¹⁶ God made two great lights—the greater light to govern the day and the lesser light to govern the night. He also made the stars. ¹⁷ God set them in the vault of the sky to give light on the earth, ¹⁸ to govern the day and the night, and to separate light from darkness. And God saw that it was good. ¹⁹ And there was evening, and there was morning—the fourth day.

²⁰ And God said, "Let the water teem with living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the vault of the sky." ²¹ So God created the great creatures of the sea and every living thing with which the water teems and that moves about in it, according to their kinds, and every winged bird according to its kind. And God saw that it was good. ²² God blessed them and said, "Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the water in the seas, and let the birds increase on the earth." ²³ And there was evening, and there was morning—the fifth day.

²⁴ And God said, "Let the land produce living creatures according to their kinds: the livestock, the creatures that move along the ground, and the wild animals, each according to its kind." And it was so. ²⁵ God made the wild animals according to their kinds, the livestock according to their kinds, and all the creatures that move along the ground according to their kinds. And God saw that it was good.

²⁶Then God said, “Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals,¹ and over all the creatures that move along the ground.”

²⁷So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. ²⁸God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.”

²⁹Then God said, “I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food. ³⁰And to all the beasts of the earth and all the birds in the sky and all the creatures that move along the ground—everything that has the breath of life in it—I give every green plant for food.” And it was so.

³¹God saw all that he had made, and it was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning—the sixth day.

2 Thus the heavens and the earth were completed in all their vast array. ²By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work. ³Then God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done.

Sermon: In The Beginning. . .

One of things you have asked me to preach on is the relationship between science and Christianity. As you can probably imagine, as a physicist, I could talk about this topic for hours!¹ It's therefore hard to distil appropriate material to form a sermon, as opposed to a workshop or public lecture. Let's restrict this broad topic to just creation for today. We just heard the majestic and worshipful poem of Genesis 1 which describes how God made the world in seven days. How are we to understand that passage in the context of modern science? Must there inevitably be conflict between the findings of science and the biblical story² of creation? Can we try to harmonise God's so-called "two books," that of Scripture and nature? More generally, how might the example of creation inform us on how better to understand the nature of Scripture itself? These are the things that we will try and consider briefly this morning.

There are many people who, through Sunday School or through a traditional, literal reading of Genesis, see it as essential to believe that God made the world in seven days. However, in the 1960s, conclusive *experimental* evidence³ arose which revealed that the universe as we know it came into existence with a big bang about 13.8 billion years ago. Moreover, the overwhelming geological evidence reveals the age of the Earth to be about 4.6 billion years old.⁴ So while matter is *not* eternal but had a definite beginning, our planet and the universe as a whole are both *very* old. To argue against this puts you in the same category as those who believe the Earth is flat! Moreover, during the first 9.2 billion years, stars were being born and, once their nuclear fuel was spent, they died – some with dramatic explosions (supernovae) that triggered further new star and solar system formation. We are therefore made from the ashes of previously exploded stars.

This being the case, what are we to make of the Genesis 1 account? Some people think that we have a choice to make: the scientific description *or* the biblical picture—and therefore reject Christianity thinking that's essential in order to maintain one's intellectual credibility. That is both sad and unnecessary. There is only a choice to be made if we think that science and the Bible are both addressing the *same* question, namely one of natural history. In other words, is the Genesis 1 account a *scientific* description or *poetic* portrayal of the creation events? It is the latter and, consequently, we do not have to make such a false choice. Genesis 1 is not, then, a *historical* account of origins, but a *literary* account. In fact, if you look *throughout* Scripture you will find *no* evidence of what we would call "modern science" hidden within its pages.⁵ God didn't even bother to reveal to the biblical authors that the earth is *ball-shaped*; that perspective came later with the Greek philosophers! Indeed, within Scripture, the earth is fixed at the center of the cosmos, which is why the Church didn't like Copernicus or Galileo and their work in establishing the sun as being at the center of the solar system with the earth moving around it. So, while the Christian tradition believes the Bible to be "inspired [by God]" that does *not*

¹ See Reddish, *Science and Christianity: Foundations and Frameworks for Moving Forward in Faith*, (Wipf & Stock, 2016).

² As we will see shortly, there are (at least) *two* stories of creation (Gen 1:1-2:3 and 2:4-3:24) and they are *not* consistent!

³ In the form of the cosmic background microwave radiation, the distant "echo" or remnants of the big bang explosion. See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cosmic_microwave_background.

⁴ See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Age_of_the_Earth.

⁵ See also: John H. Walton, *The Lost World of Genesis One*, (InterVarsity, 2009).

mean that it is an encyclopaedia of all human knowledge.⁶ We should *not* look to the Bible for things that it was never intended to address.⁷ After all, it would have been pointless for God to reveal to the authors of Genesis the technical details of creation; they would have never understood it! However we may understand “divine inspiration,” God needs to accommodate himself and his language to that suitable of his audience in order for any message to be effective. That being the case, what can we learn from Genesis 1?

Table 1: A Framework of God’s Creative Activity in Genesis 1	
God Creates “Spaces” (or Domains)	God Fills “Spaces” (or Domains)
Day 1	Day 4
God separates light from darkness (v4). ⁸	God fills the sky with lights: the sun, moon and stars—to rule the seasons and maintain the separation between darkness and light (v14–18).
Day 2	Day 5
God separates the sky from the “waters” (v7,8).	God fills the waters with living creatures ⁹ and the sky with birds (v20–22).
Day 3¹⁰	Day 6
(a) God separates the land from the seas (v9,10). (b) God fills the land with <i>vegetation</i> making it ready for Day 6.	(a) God fills the land with domestic and wild <i>animals</i> (v24,25). (b) God makes humankind (v26–30).

First, we see that *God* is the primary subject of this chapter and whose ultimate origin is unquestioned by this community of faith. Second, the liturgy-like poetry introduces a seven-day structure ending with a Sabbath, which is most appropriate if the writer is of a priestly class – as is thought to be the case. While seven is the number of completeness, unity and perfection, eight creative acts are to be found within six days. We see [in **Table 1**] that in the first three days God first *separates* spaces or regions and then *fills* each of those spaces in the next three days. [If you see reflect on that schema for a moment, you” recognise it makes so much sense!] Rather than viewing God’s activities on these six days in a *historical* sense, or one that is meant to correspond to a *scientific* sequence,¹¹ it is wiser to view the

⁶ The Bible is *not* “inerrant” in terms of its “science,” “history,” etc., rather we believe it to be *reliable* in terms of *salvation*.

⁷ This is an important principle that goes well beyond the science and faith debate.

⁸ Old Testament scholar, Terrence Fretheim, points out that light was thought to have another source (Job 38:19; Isa 30:26) and only augmented by the sun. (e.g., light on a cloudy day, and before sunrise and after sunset.) Fretheim, “Genesis,” 343.

⁹ God also made fear-inducing sea monsters (Gen 1:21) that were often, particularly in neighboring cultures, associated with chaos. This portrayal appears in many places within the Old Testament (e.g., Prov 8:29; Ps 33:6–9, 74:13–14; Job 26:8–13, 38:8–11) showing that the people understood God’s creative acts *not* as a modern scientific sense, but in the context of the *creation stories of their neighbouring cultures* (e.g., Babylonian and Canaanite).

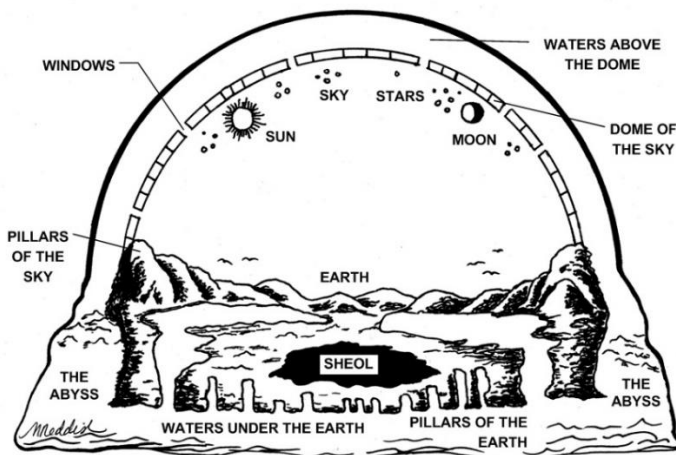
¹⁰ On day 3, God not only creates the *space* of dry land but provides vegetation of all kinds to make it *habitable*, or ready, for all animal life and humankind who will *fill* the space on day 6. In light of Gen 1:28–29; 9:2–3, all air-breathing animals were intended to be vegetarian! In keeping with this picture, Isa 11:7; 65:25 imply that animals will be herbivorous in the new creation.

¹¹ Some try to maintain the *sequence* but not a *literal* time-line as an attempt to correlate the “days” with geological eras/epochs. However, this interpretation still assumes that encoded within Gen 1 *is* a historical/scientific account (i.e.,

days as a *literary* pattern corresponding to the general theme of God bringing *order* out of disorder.¹² In which case there is absolutely *no* need make a choice between science and the Bible because they provide *complementary* descriptions of the same reality.

Third, there is a poetic regularity to each day’s activities; there is a verbal command: “God said let there be (light, etc.),” an execution: “And it was so,” an assessment: “God saw it was good,” and a sequence: “There was evening and morning . . .” While this pattern is not perfectly symmetrical throughout all the six days,¹³ the overall effect is to give a melodic crescendo that peaks at the end of day six, followed—appropriately—by relaxation and blessing on the seventh (or Sabbath) day. Indeed, as theologians remind us, the true climax is on the seventh day with the story beginning and ending with God—not culminating with the creation of humankind! We see in each of the six days that God’s speech is actionable and nothing thwarts God’s intentions. Creation is not an accident but a deliberate act of the divine will. Moreover, God approves and delights in his creation, affirming it as “very good” at the end of day six.¹⁴ Nevertheless, “good” does not imply a static state of perfection or a creation in no need of further development.¹⁵ Rather, creation is purposeful and dynamic; the potential of “becoming” is built into the very structure of things.¹⁶ Nothing in this description is at odds with science, not least because science focuses on the “How?” question and theology on the “Why?” For that reason, we can embrace evolutionary biology and the findings of geology and astronomy because they address *how* God made the world, not *why* he did do.¹⁷ And the simple theological answer to the *why*-question is: out of *love*; the trinitarian love overflows into creative acts!

Before continuing, it is worth reminding ourselves that the Scriptures do not argue for the geocentric perspective in the way that we commonly think. When we read Gen 1:1: “In the beginning when God created the heaven and the earth,” we imagine a NASA picture of a blue-green planet surrounded by space, stars, and the Milky Way galaxy. But that is not how the original audience would have imagined the created order. That verse could be translated: “In the



Concordism). One obvious problem (and there are others) is the vegetation of day 3 (which requires a sun for photosynthesis) appearing before the sun is made on day 4! To say “Nothing is impossible with God” (Luke 1:37; Mark 10:27; Matt 19:26) is an incoherent response – as well as quoting scripture out of context.

¹² Gen 1:2. “Creation out of (literally) nothing” is not a key theme in the Old Testament but arose later (e.g., 2 Macc 7:28); *creatio ex nihilo* is a post-biblical doctrine from around the end of the 2nd century CE.

¹³ The reference to “let us make” in Gen 1:26 is *not* a reference to the Trinity but to the divine council (Ps 82:1; Job 1:6).

¹⁴ This “good” should not be seen as *morally* good, rather it is fit for God’s intended purposes.

¹⁵ This gives plenty of room to accommodate cosmic and biological evolution.

¹⁶ See Gen 1:16-18, 22,26, 28; God *delegates* and allows *freedom* for creation to become the “other.”

¹⁷ One reason some struggle with this is, I think, because we can’t *imagine* the timescales involved - *billions* of years. Neither can we imagine billions of stars and galaxies; these descriptors of *space* and *time* are outside of our common experience.

beginning when God created the *sky* and the *land*”—and the rest of the chapter provides the details.¹⁸ The biblical view of the created order was one that was essentially “flat” (or layered), with the underworld (*sheol*) below the land, and a domed canopy of sky above (see **Fig. 1** above), and its important to keep this image in mind to make sense of biblical references to creation.¹⁹

Some of you may be thinking, “What about the story of Adam and Eve?”²⁰ OK, let’s look at that briefly. Interestingly, the word for “God” in Genesis 1 is *YHWH* (Yahweh) and in the Adam and Eve story its *Elohim*, indicating that here are two *separate* creation stories—with the Adam and Eve account likely being much older. Wisely, the later editors – around the 6th century BCE, the time of the Babylonian exile – decided *not* to try and harmonise them but to simply present the two accounts one after the other. That’s just as well as they are inconsistent with each other! For example, in Gen 2 we read that God first made Adam (from clay)²¹, then – realising it was not good for him to be alone²² – made all the *animals and birds*,²³ before finally making Eve.²⁴ This is in contradiction to God’s creative activities on days 5 and 6 in Genesis 1.

Part of the Adam and Eve story is the so-called “Fall” in Genesis 3, with the tempting serpent²⁵ and the fruit on the mysterious tree of the “knowledge of good and evil.”²⁶ Many Christians assume this chapter as implying a fall *down* from a state of moral *and* physical perfection. In other words, something physically happened with the subsequent “curse” that changed natural history.²⁷ A better way to view the “Fall” is to see it as a falling “out” rather than a falling “down.” The story is really about the breakdown of *trust* or of the *relationship* between people *and* God, between Adam *and* Eve [and, later, Cain and Abel], and between themselves *and* the created order. By not *trusting* the Creator they fall out of relationship with him, resulting in separation, alienation, and disharmony – which is a basic definition of “sin.”²⁸ The Hebrew concept of *shalom* is a restoration of peace with God, with each other, and with the created order. This is a reversal of that falling out of relationship and, for the Christian, *shalom* is ultimately achieved through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

¹⁸ See also Jonah 1:9; Ps 95:5.

¹⁹ For example, when we read certain biblical texts - like Isa 40:22 - they become far more understandable when we imagine it from a *land*-based standpoint rather than our modern *planetary* perspective.

²⁰ See Gen 2:4-3:24.

²¹ “Adam” has Hebrew wordplay with the *adama*, meaning “ground.” God as potter is a common metaphor in the Old Testament, e.g., Isa 45:9, 64:8; Jer 18:1-23; Job 10:9, 33:6.

²² Gen 2:18.

²³ Gen 2:19-20.

²⁴ Gen 2:21-22. The Adam and Eve account is often thought to be older than that of Gen 1, due to its simplicity/naivety.

²⁵ In Gen 3, the Hebrew word for the snake’s wisdom (*arum*) appears to be a word play with *arummim*, meaning “naked”; this subtly is, of course, lost in translation. What the serpent is *not*, at least at this stage in Old Testament literature, is a euphemism for the satan, the “adversary” or “accuser.” This connection is made much later, e.g., Wis 2:24, Rev 12:9, 20:2.

²⁶ Gen 2:9, 16-17.

²⁷ Gen 3:14-19. This literal reading overlooks the “blessings and curses” motif in the Old Testament (e.g. Deut 28).

²⁸ Note too that the final form of the text emerged in the context of the Babylonian exile. This is also alienation and an enforced expulsion from their homeland, one brought about—as they understood it—by their persistent breaking of their covenantal *relationship* with God – see [27].

Curiously, while we often remember the Adam and Eve story, there is *no* explicit mention of Adam in the Old Testament outside of Genesis²⁹—although the pervasiveness of sin is assumed.³⁰ In the New Testament, however, Paul contrasts Christ with Adam in Rom 5 and 1 Cor 15. Now Paul, being a man of his time, may well have believed that Adam was a historical person, but his *theological* point does not depend on that being true. The bottom line is that the Adam and Eve account is a *story* and it is an unnecessary category mistake to see it as *history*. We need to be mindful to *not* force *our* modern questions onto an ancient narrative or to over-analyse it.³¹ Since the story was for the benefit of its original hearers, we must assume it was sufficient for its intended purpose.³² The creation accounts *do*, however, tell us something important about God and the world he has made and our place within it. It introduces a God of power, provision, and promises. It introduces our identity in relation to our Maker and the responsibility God has given us to look after the world as his representative caretaker.³³ And it introduces the presence of sin in the world and, because of that, our need for redemption, which then becomes the major theme that runs throughout the whole of the Bible.

So, must there inevitably be conflict between the findings of science and the biblical accounts of creation? No, because they are complementary – *not* competing—descriptions of reality. That being the case, it is a mistake to try and harmonise Scripture and nature. It is *not* a question of science *or* the Bible, but science *and* the Bible. There is *much* more one could say concerning science and faith, including talking about the so-called “Anthropic Principle,”³⁴ but I hope that at least helps. I also asked at the beginning how this example of creation might inform us on how better to understand the nature of Scripture itself. This is a much bigger issue which I plan to address further next week. What we have already seen in the opening chapters of Genesis are inconsistencies between the two creation accounts; how are we to make sense of that? If God inspired the authors and editors of Scripture, as both Jews and Christians agree, should not the Bible be free from such inconsistencies? If you think about it just for a moment, you will see that it all depends on what you mean by “inspire”! That is a cliff-hanger of an ending (!), but addressing that topic provides a key to understanding the broader nature of Scripture. Let us pray.

²⁹ Adam is referred to in the later writings: Sir 33:10, 40:1, 49:16; Tob 8:6; 2 Esdras 3:5,10,21,26, 4:30, 6:54, 7:11,46,48. Odd references (e.g., Job 20:4;31:33; Isa 43:27) are ambiguous. See also Peter Enns, *The Evolution of Adam* (Brazos, 2012).

³⁰ See, for example, 1 Kgs 8:46, Jer 13:23, and Ps 51.

³¹ Old Testament scholar, Walter Brueggemann, emphasizes that (a) the biblical authors (even Paul) are not as concerned with this passage as, say, Augustine and the birth of the notion of “original” sin, (b) the text does *not* seek to explain *how* evil came into the world, (c) neither is it an account of the origin of death (a mechanistic link between sin and death). Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 42–43.

³² For an example of a modern retelling of the Adam and Eve story see Reddish, *The Amish Farmer Who Hated L.A.*, 15–26.

³³ Gen 1:26-30; 2:15. The command to “subdue” or “have dominion” (Gen 1:28) is *not* divine licence to rape the land, sea and sky; it does *not* legitimize abuse or exploitation of *God’s* creation. As Old Testament scholar, Bernhard Anderson, puts it: “Adam is not an autonomous being, at liberty to rule the earth arbitrarily or violently. On the contrary, human dominion is to be exercised wisely and benevolently so that God’s dominion over the earth may be manifest in care for the earth and in the exercise of justice.”

³⁴ See Reddish, *Science and Christianity*, (Wipf & Stock, 2016), p72-76. This is an example of *Natural* Theology. There is also more one can say about Old Testament references to creation outside of Genesis (e.g., Job 38-41), see p155-163.