

WHAT ABOUT EVOLUTION?

By Terran Williams

If you're hoping that I am going to persuade you the theory of evolution is right or wrong, that's not what you'll find here. I offer a fresh perspective that reveals that whether God created by evolution or not is not a major biblical issue at all, even though many Christians think it is.

Many people cannot believe in Christianity because they are convinced by the theory of evolution. They read the opening chapters of the Bible, which tell how God created humans on the 6th day. They think to themselves, "I believe that it took millions of years for Homo sapiens to evolve to the species they now are, so this book, the Bible, is wrong. I cannot be a Christian."

In response many Christians, particularly in America, insist that evolution is wrong and give wide and varied scientific arguments to assert this. Some scientists have been convinced by these arguments. However, there are still many honest, thinking people who find these counter-arguments against evolution to be unconvincing.

This leaves such a person in a corner: either believe in evolution or believe the Bible is God's Word.

As a result, many Christians, having become convinced by the evidence for evolution, have felt compelled to walk away from their faith, and many others, though drawn to the Christian faith, have felt unable to embrace it with intellectual conviction.

My proposal: the possibility of believing both

Is it necessary to make evolution and belief in the Bible mutually incompatible? Is it not possible to believe that God created Homo sapiens through a process that he guided, a process called macro-evolution?

The answer I propose is that it is possible to believe both at the same time. I am not saying that evolution is correct (though it may be), merely that it is possible to be a Bible-believing evolutionist.

The way to believe in both the Bible and evolution is to read the Bible correctly: it is my conviction that Genesis 1-3, **which is God's Word**, should be read with its unique genre in mind: it is – parabolic history, not scientific data.

Don't hear what I am not saying. I am not saying that Genesis 1-3 is completely mythological and parabolic. That would mean that the New Testament can't be trusted because it teaches belief in a literal first couple who were created by God, became the progenitors of the entire human race, and who plummeted humanity into sin. But does this mean that we must swing to the other extreme and say that Genesis 1-3 is completely literal. This becomes important when we repeat a commonly asked question: Did God create the world in six literal days?

In answering this question, people have come up with several different answers. They are 1) yes, he created the world and the universe at the same time; 2) yes, but a created universe and an undeveloped planet preceded these six days; 3) yes, but there were long time gaps between each day, 4) no, the days refer not to days of creation, but to days of revelation, where God revealed **different aspects of creation to the writer on different days**; 5) **no, each 'day' in these verses probably refers to an indefinite period of time** (this is called the age-day theory, and was taught first by Augustine).

Over the years I vacillated between some of these views in my attempt to, on the one hand to believe **the Bible, which is God's word to us, and yet at on the other hand to not dismiss clear scientific discovery.**

Although some of these five answers have their strengths, I have decided to not embrace any of **them. Through exposure to Michael Eaton's view, I now see one problem with all five of them: they** all read the details on Genesis 1-3 in an overly literal way. I believe Genesis 1-3 should not be read in an overly literal way at all, since this portion of Scripture presents itself as a kind of literature that is both parabolic (or figurative) and historical at the same time. After all, one of the main rules of properly interpreting different parts of the Bible is to be sensitive to what kind of literature it is.

Genesis 1-3 as parabolic history

So what kind of literature is Genesis 1-3? It does not present itself as pure history. And it does not present itself as pure parable. But it does appear to be a combination of both: parabolic history. Let me explain.

It certainly is history as the rest of the Bible speaks of a literal Adam and Eve. But it is history written in a parabolic style. It is full of symbolism – a woman is made out of a bone, a snake talks, a tree determines the history of the human race, another tree can keep humankind alive. The bone, the trees, the snake – they all represent something real and historical, but in the form of parable.

Another proof that Genesis 1 is parable is that it does not put much weight on chronology. It seems the writer puts things in groups rather than in strict chronology. For example, day and night is created on the first day – whereas the sun and moon (which create the experience of day and night) are only created on day four. Another example of grouping is seen in the parallels between day 1 and 4 (light, and light-bearers); day 2 and 5 (water above and below the sky, and birds and sea creatures); and day 3 and 6 (land, water and vegetation, and animals, reptiles and humankind).

Another evidence that Genesis 1 should not be taken literally is that Genesis 2 describes in detail the events of day six described in Genesis 1 – and these events clearly take longer than a day. Besides day 7 is, according to the Bible itself (see Hebrews 4:10-11) still happening. A straightforward reading of Genesis 1-3 therefore suggests that we should not read it in an overly literal way.

An example of parabolic history elsewhere in the Bible is when Nathan tells king David a parable of a **rich man taking a poor man's sheep (here the rich man refers to David, and the poor man to Uriah, and the sheep to Bathsheba) – it speaks of an historical reality (i.e. David's adultery with Bathsheba)** but in a parabolic form. Parabolic history was a very common form of literature in Mesopotamia (where undeniably real events and people are spoken of in parabolic ways) – so it should not come as a surprise to us Genesis 1-3, written at the same time as this kind of literature, employs the same kind of genre.

Eaton sums up his view by writing, 'We are surely not meant to press the details of Genesis 1 into harmony with science. Genesis 1 is like a vision (maybe – and we cannot know for sure – Moses received it as a vision). We miss the point if we treat it like a scientific textbook... I agree with John Calvin who said, 'Let him who would learn astronomy go somewhere else'.'

For those who believe that these verses should be read in a completely literal way, two arguments are usually given. Firstly, Exodus 20:11 speak of six literal days followed by a Sabbath. In response, I say that the seven-**day week is certainly based on Genesis 1, but this doesn't mean the days have to be literal days.** They can serve as a pattern without having to be literal. Secondly, some say, "If you **don't take these verses literally then at what point do you take the Bible literally?**" In response, I say that good interpretation requires that we take different parts of the Bible according to their genre – so parabolic history, pure parable, poetry and apocalyptic writings for example should never be interpreted in an overly literal way – that would be a misuse of Scripture. Genesis 1-3 reaches back into the unimaginably distant past – so it does not come as a surprise that the writer of Genesis employs a partially figurative genre.

However, as said before, I am not saying that Genesis 1-3 is pure parable, or myth. Not at all! It speaks of real events that happened in the unimaginably distant past: God created the world and life with a series of interventions and creations; God created a real couple, who are the ancestors of the whole human race; and this couple, tempted by the devil himself, disobeyed God. This I believe without reservation. But I do not believe that Genesis 1-3 seeks to tell us exactly, with scientific and detailed factuality, what happened. Rather the historical events are shrouded in parable and picture – and these pictures powerfully communicate theological meaning.

Of course, you're free to disagree with me. Although every Christian is called to carefully think through the issues, we need to give each other the freedom to think differently on this non-essential aspect of Christian doctrine. To become familiar with the more literal ways of reading Genesis 1, for example, see these two websites which reflect the two most popular views:

www.answersingenesis.org (which defends the view that the world was created in six literal days) and www.godandscience.org (which challenges the literal six days view and in its place suggests the age-day theory, thereby backing the common scientific view that the universe is fifteen billion years old, the earth about four billion years old, and homo sapiens at least 100000 years in existence).

And if you'd like to explore the thinking behind those Christians who believe that God used evolution as his way of creating life in all it's diversity see www.biologos.org/questions.

So why is Genesis 1 in the bible?

If the opening chapter of the Bible (Genesis 1) does not tell us, as I believe, the specific, scientific details regarding how the world and life came about, what do they tell us? Genesis 1 tells us much...

Genesis 1 tells us that God, the only creator, alone is worthy of our worship. Ancient people were polytheistic – they believed in many gods. Some worshipped the sun, or the moon. Some worshipped animals, or the sea. Some worshipped the rain (or the fertility gods that were seen as the source of the rain). Then along comes Genesis 1 which says to these people, “There is one God – and only one God – who alone made everything. The things that you worship as gods are created by the supreme and unique creator. He alone deserves your worship.” Still today, humanity tends to worship created things rather than the creator – who alone is worthy of worship (see Romans 1:25). We tend to take good things – like money, children, careers, pleasure, security and education – and elevate them to ultimate importance in our lives. Instead of finding our identity and significance in God, we find it in lesser, created things. These verses remind us that the wonders of creation point to a reality greater and more glorious than themselves – God. We need to renounce the worship of anything created, and worship the creator instead!

Genesis 1 tells us that creation is meant to be valued by us, and to bring us joy. Verses 4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25 and 31 repeat the refrain: “And God saw that it was good”. God made a good world. This tells us that all of creation is valuable to him – and therefore should be valuable to us. It tells us that all of creation brings him joy – and it should bring us joy. Philosophers and various religions have often taught that matter is either an illusion (and therefore of no real value) or intrinsically evil – and that instead the world of spirit is the only real, good reality. This leads to neglecting the environment, hating our bodies, treating physical sins as though they are not real anyway, and ascetically avoiding pleasures as though this is something noble to do. These verses destroy that line of thinking. This **also tells us that evil is a foreign invader of God's good world. We know that creation is fallen, but we must affirm that evil was not originally built into the world. Somehow, something good God created became corrupt** (more about this in Genesis 3).

Genesis 1 tells us creation is a window into the glory of its creator. God created an ordered world. God created the world according to scientific and natural laws. There is a pattern in his world. We **notice how light and darkness can't co-exist** (v5), how life reproduces after its kind (v11-12), how the

sun and moon create predictable cycles and seasons (v16,18), and how God creates in stages – one stage building upon another. Today, we can give ourselves to the study of science, biology, astronomy, genetics and more, **simply because God created an ordered world. We're meant to study** creation to discover what God has built into it. What an intelligent and brilliant God! God created a world of variety and wonder. The world may be ordered, but it is also infinitely beautiful. Think of how God creates vegetation, birds, animals, sea creatures, stars, the moon, the sun, water, sky, light, darkness, food, pleasure, sex (as **implied by verse 28**). **We're meant to experience life in a way** that inspires wonder and awe. What an imaginative and beautiful God! God created the world with humankind in mind. Day 1-5 is preparation for day 6 when humankind is created to enjoy a world that is habitable – all because God created the world with us in mind. The reason that humankind has thrived on this planet is not because our species accidentally prevailed over previous species (as many assume), but because God created the world with us in mind! **The world is God's gift to us –** although it is our responsibility to steward it not abuse it (v28). What a loving and purposeful God! God created the world by the sheer power of his word (v3, 6, 9, 11, 14, 20, 24, 26). The recurring words of God which utter, "Let there be" or "**Let the...**" is followed by the sentence, "and it was so". Whatever God says, goes. He is totally sovereign, and free to create and do whatever he pleases. His power is absolute. His sovereignty is unrivalled. His authority is unmatched. And notice that God speaks – this is something personal. God is personal being, not an impersonal force. He thinks, he imagines, he acts, he chooses, he appreciates, and he speaks. What a powerful and personal God! Psalm 19:1 tells us that creation declares the glory of God. Reading these verses, and experiencing creation, should lead us to the same response – **with all our hearts we should declare, 'God is glorious!'**