

The Intersection of Faith and Science: A Reflection on Genesis

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Note: This reflection originally was accompanied by a printed version of Genesis 1:1-27, 31 and Genesis 2:2-7, 19, 21, 22, with the quoted phrases underlined and the days in Genesis 1 bolded, so that listeners could readily follow along. The passages comprised the lectionary (scripture of the day).

Good morning, this is Religion and Science Weekend. It used to be called Evolution Sunday. Back in the early 2000's anti-evolution school board policies began to arise—again. These policies have been springing up for a century now. These policies call for the teaching of Creationism; that is, the Creation story as told in Genesis, in place of Evolution in the science classroom. In 2004 the Clergy Letter Project was created to counter the perception that science and religion are in conflict. The group began collecting signatures of religious leaders on an open letter that included the following statements:

“While virtually all Christians take the Bible seriously and hold it to be authoritative in matters of faith and practice, the overwhelming majority do not read the Bible literally, as they would a science textbook.

“Religious truth is ... different ... from scientific truth. Its purpose is not to convey scientific information but to transform hearts.

“We ask that science remain science and that religion remain religion, two very different, but complementary, forms of truth.

To date, almost 16,000 Christian clergy have signed the letter. Furthermore, clergy from five other religious traditions have increased the number of signatories to almost 19,000. By the way, I am a scientific advisor to the organization.

In 2006, the Sunday closest to Charles Darwin’s birthday, February 12th, was designated as “Evolution Sunday”, a day for teach-ins at congregations. Two years later, it was renamed “Evolution Weekend” to be more inclusive of non-Christian denominations. And, in 2022 it was changed to “Religion and Science Weekend”, in response to growing attacks on science in general.

Today we are merely going to dip our toes into the waters of the intersection—some would say controversy—of religion and science. One aspect of the controversy is whether the Bible is the literal, inerrant Word of God or rather that the Bible should be read as a figurative text. The dispute over literal vs figurative reading of the Bible is nothing new; it began in the 1st Century, CE. By this time, faithful Christians already were divided into the Antiochene [an-TIGH-uh-keen] school (named after the city of Antioch) and the Alexandrian school of thought (named after the city of Alexandria). The Antiochene school insisted on literal reading of the Bible, while the Alexandrian school held that the Bible was an allegorical text. The Alexandrian philosophy—reading the Bible as allegory—predominated for over a millennium. In fact, not until the Reformation—thank you very much John Calvin and Martin Luther—do we see the church turn primarily to literal interpretation of the Bible.

Let me walk you through deciding for yourself whether or not the Bible is inerrant and should be read literally. (You will notice that I have underlined and bolded some portions of the text—to help you follow along.) Let’s start with Genesis 1:3.

(1:3) “Let there be light”; and there was light.” Note that this happened on the first day.

Let’s now jump to the fourth day. (1:16) “God made the two great lights—the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night—and the stars.” Now, if God made the sun, the moon, and the stars on the fourth day, where did the light on the first day come from?

Let’s go back up to the third day. (1:11) “Then God said, ‘Let the earth put forth vegetation: plants yielding seed, and fruit trees of every kind’.” Now, everyone knows that plants need sunlight. If there was no sun yet, how did the plants survive?

Did you even realize that Genesis 1 and Genesis 2 offer two separate versions of the creation story? Well, there’s a problem there. In Genesis 1, on the fifth day (1:21), God made the creatures that live in water and all of the birds. On day six, (1:25) God made all of the animals of the earth, as well as (1:27) God created humankind. And on that day, he made both male and female.

Let’s now look at Genesis 2. (2:4) The story starts on “the day that the Lord God made the earth and the heavens” – which according to Genesis 1:1, was the first day. Genesis 2 continues (2:5) that on this first day “when no plant of the field was yet in the earth” ... “the Lord God formed man” (2:7).

Much later after that, (2:19) the story continues, “the Lord God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air”.

Do you see what might be contradictions? In Genesis 2, God made man on the first day, when there were no plants. Jump back to Genesis 1: Man was not created until Day 6; and plants, and animals, and birds were all made before that.

Acknowledging that there are two different versions, which version is correct?

But, wait, there's more: According to Genesis 2, God created man, then plants and animals and birds. And only after that, did he make woman. If the Bible is the inerrant Word of God, how can there be two different versions of when woman was created? And, which version of Genesis is correct? Chapter 1 or Chapter 2?

The literalists have a lot of explaining to do! However, none of this is problematic if we regard the text as allegory.

I hope that you will join me in understanding that the Bible was written to explain the mysteries of life to a population that was mostly illiterate, and to a people with no knowledge of science.

Beyond the Creationism vs Evolution controversy, there is a long history of the church rejecting scientific evidence. For example, Galileo was prosecuted in 1633 by a Roman Catholic Inquisition because he refused to recant his view of heliocentrism—that the Earth revolved around the sun. Church doctrine insisted—based on the description in Genesis—that the sun revolved around the Earth. It took almost two centuries for the Catholic Church to reverse its ban on the publication of Galileo's writings. It was not until 1992 that Pope John Paul II admitted that the theologians at the time of Galileo were wrong in using a literal interpretation of the Bible to reject Galileo's scientific findings.

Even today, there are detractors who contend that scientists aim to disprove the Bible or even the existence of God. Although there may be some outspoken scientists who are atheists, what most scientists want is the recognition that religion and science are two different, but complimentary, forms of truth.

And, even if you are not a scientist yourself, I hope that you might agree that the purpose of the Bible is not to convey scientific information but

to transform hearts. (Yes, I am quoting from the Clergy Letter.) That is what Religion and Science Weekend is all about.

May you all accept both the love of God and the truth of science. Happy birthday, Charles Darwin. Amen.