

Creation: Genesis as Foundation—Part 2



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Job 26:7–10; Genesis 1; Genesis 2; Genesis 5; Genesis 11; 1 Chron. 1:18–27; Matt. 19:4, 5; John 1:1–3.*

Memory Text: “The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament shows His handiwork” (*Psalms 19:1, NKJV*).

Many great thinkers were inspired by Scripture to explore God's created world; as a result, modern science was born. Johannes Kepler, Isaac Newton, John Ray, Robert Boyle, and other early great scientists believed that their work revealed even more about the handiwork of God's creation.

After the French Revolution, however, nineteenth-century science began to move from a theistic worldview to one based on naturalism and materialism, often with no place at all for the supernatural. These philosophical ideas were popularized by Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859). Since that time, science has increasingly distanced itself from its biblical foundation, resulting in a radical reinterpretation of the Genesis story.

Does the Bible teach an antiquated, unscientific view of cosmology? Was the biblical account simply borrowed from the surrounding pagan nations? Was the Bible culturally conditioned by its place and time, or does its inspired nature elevate us to a view of origins that is complete in its divine framework?

These are some of the issues we will touch on in this week's lesson.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, May 30.

A Flat Earth?

It is commonly believed that many in the ancient world thought the earth was flat. Most people, however, for a variety of good reasons, understood that the earth was round. Even to this day, though, some claim that the Bible itself taught that the earth was flat.

Read Revelation 7:1 and Revelation 20:7, 8. What is the context of these verses? More important, do they teach a flat earth?

John, the author of these texts, is writing end-time prophecy describing the four angels of heaven “standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds” (*Rev. 7:1, NASB*). He repeated the word “four” three times to tie the angels to the four compass points.

In short, he’s just using figurative language, as we do today when we say, for example, that “the sun is setting” or that the wind “rose from the east.” To insist on a literal interpretation of these prophetic texts when the context indicates a figurative idea of north, south, east, and west is to take these passages out of context and make them teach something that they are not teaching. After all, when Jesus said, “For out of *the heart* proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies” (*Matt. 15:19, NKJV; emphasis supplied*), He was not talking about human physiology, or the literal human heart. He was using a figure of speech to make a moral point.

Read Job 26:7–10 and Isaiah 40:21, 22. What do they teach us about the nature of the earth?

In Job 26:7 the earth is depicted as being suspended in space: “ ‘He stretches out the north over empty space and hangs the earth on nothing’ ” (*NASB*). The earth is a “ ‘circle,’ ” or sphere (*Job 26:10, NASB*). Isaiah 40:22 states, “It is He who sits above the circle of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers, who stretches out the heavens like a curtain” (*NKJV*).

Put yourself in the position of someone who lived thousands of years ago. What evidence would you have that the earth moved? Or would you find the evidence that it stood still more convincing? Or what evidence would you find that it is flat, or round?

Creation in Ancient Literature

Archaeologists have discovered texts from ancient Egypt and the Near East that contain primeval histories of the Creation and the Flood. This has caused some to wonder whether the Genesis account was borrowed from these cultures or was dependent in some way on them. But is such a thing really the case?

Read Genesis 1:1–2:4, and then read these excerpts from the *Atra-Ḥasis* Epic: “When the gods instead of man / Did the work, bore the loads, / The gods’ load was too great, / The work too hard, the trouble too much / . . . ‘Let the womb-goddess create offspring, / And let man bear the load of the gods!’ . . . Geshtu-e, a god who had intelligence, / They slaughtered in their assembly. / Nintu mixed clay / With his flesh and blood. . . .”—Stephanie Dalley, *Myths From Mesopotamia: Creation, the Flood, Gilgamesh, and Others* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 9, 14, 15. What differences can you see?

Although there are similarities between the stories (e.g., the first humans are made of clay), the differences are much more definite.

1. In *Atra-Ḥasis* man works for the gods so that the gods can rest. In Genesis, God creates the earth and everything in it *for* humans as the apex of Creation, and then He rests with them. In Genesis, humans also are placed in a garden and invited to commune with God and care for His creation—a concept not found in *Atra-Ḥasis*.

2. In *Atra-Ḥasis*, a minor god is killed and his blood is mixed with clay to form seven males and females. In Genesis, first Adam is “formed” intimately by God, who breathes life into him, and woman is “made” later to be his “‘helper’” (*NKJV*). God didn’t create Adam and Eve from the blood of a slain god.

3. There is no sign of conflict or violence in the Genesis account, as found in the *Atra-Ḥasis* story.

The biblical account is sublime in depicting an omnipotent God who provides humanity with dignified purpose in a perfect world. This radical difference has caused scholars to conclude that, in the end, these are very different creation accounts.

Some have argued that, through the ages, creation and flood stories were handed down, loosely based on what really had happened (hence some of the similarities), but distorted over time. In contrast, Moses, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, revealed what had really taken place. Why does this explanation work better in accounting for the few similarities than does the idea that Moses borrowed from these pagan stories?

Genesis Versus Paganism

Far from being dependent upon ancient pagan creation myths, Genesis seems to have been written in a way that refutes those myths and distances God as Creator from them.

Read Genesis 1:14–19. How are the entities that appear on the fourth day described, and what are their functions?

The terms “sun” and “moon” were surely avoided because their names in Hebrew were the names (or closely related to the names) of the sun and moon gods of the ancient Near East and Egypt. The use of the terms “greater light” and “lesser light” showed that they were created for specific functions, “‘for signs and seasons, and for days and years’ ” and to “‘give light on the earth’ ” (*Gen. 1:14, 15, NKJV*). That is, the text shows very clearly that the sun and moon were not gods but created objects with specific natural functions, much as we understand them today.

Read Genesis 2:7, 18–24. How is God intimately involved in the creation of Adam and Eve?

The ancient Near Eastern myths unanimously depict man’s creation as an afterthought, resulting from an attempt to relieve the gods of hard labor. This mythical notion is contradicted by the biblical idea that man is to rule the world as God’s vice-regent. Nothing in the creation of humans was an afterthought. If anything, the text points to them as the climax of the Creation account, showing even more starkly how different the pagan and biblical accounts really are.

Genesis, thus, presents a corrective against the myths of the ancient world. Moses used certain terms and ideas incompatible with pagan concepts. And he did this by simply expressing the biblical understanding of reality, and of God’s role and purpose in Creation.

Thousands of years ago, the biblical Creation story was at odds with the prevailing culture. Today, the biblical Creation story is at odds with the prevailing culture. Why shouldn’t we be surprised?

Creation and Time

Read Genesis 5 and Genesis 11. How does the Bible trace the history of humanity from Adam to Noah—and from Noah to Abraham?

There is one element that makes these genealogies unique in the Bible: they contain the element of time, causing some scholars to correctly call them “chronogenealogies.” They contain an interlocking mechanism of descent information coupled with spans of time, so that “when *Person 1* had lived x years, he fathered *Person 2*. And *Person 1*, after he fathered *Person 2*, lived y years, and he fathered other sons and daughters.” Genesis 5 adds the formula phrase, “And all the days of *Person 1* were z years.” This interlocking system would have precluded deleting certain generations or adding them. Genesis 5 and Genesis 11 contain a continuous line of descent, as corroborated by 1 Chronicles 1:18–27, in which there are no added or missing generations. In this way the Bible interprets itself.

For nearly 2,000 years, Jewish and Christian expositors have interpreted these texts to represent history and an accurate way to determine the date of the Flood and the age of the earth, at least from the seven days of Creation as depicted in Genesis 1 and Genesis 2.

In recent decades, there have been attempts to reinterpret Genesis 5 and Genesis 11 to accommodate longer ages, as some archaeological and historical data are interpreted (by fallible human beings) to suggest. This raises serious questions about the reliability of the Bible record.

But if we are to understand God’s concept of time and its progression through history, we must recognize that these two chapters are “both historical and theological, linking Adam with the rest of humankind and God with man in the realm of the reaches of space and time. Genesis 5 and 11:10–26 provide the time framework and human chain that link God’s people with the man whom God created as the climax of the six-day creation event of this planet.”—Gerhard F. Hasel, “The Meaning of the Chronogenealogies of Genesis 5 and 11,” *Origins* 7/2 (1980), p. 69.

Though these texts in the Old Testament are there for good and important reasons, what does Paul say in 1 Timothy 1:4 and Titus 3:9 that we need to heed when talking about such texts?

Creation in Scripture

Read the following texts and write down how each writer referenced Genesis 1–11:

Matt. 19:4, 5 _____

Mark 10:6–9 _____

Luke 11:50, 51 _____

John 1:1–3 _____

Acts 14:15 _____

Rom. 1:20 _____

2 Cor. 4:6 _____

Eph. 3:9 _____

1 Tim. 2:12–15 _____

James 3:9 _____

1 Pet. 3:20 _____

Jude 11, 14 _____

Rev. 2:7; Rev. 3:14; Rev. 22:2, 3 _____

Jesus and *all* of the New Testament writers refer to Genesis 1–11 as reliable history. Jesus refers to Moses’ writings and the creation of male and female (*Matt. 19:4*). Paul often uses the Creation account to substantiate the theological points he makes in his epistles. He declared to the learned men of Athens, “The God who made the world and all things in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands” (*Acts 17:24, NASB*). In these ways, the New Testament writers built on the foundational nature of Genesis to show the modern reader the significance of this literal event.

Read Romans 5. More than half a dozen times, Paul makes a link from Adam to Jesus (*see Rom. 5:12, 14–19*). That is, he assumes the literal existence of a historical Adam, a position that becomes fatally compromised when an evolutionary model of origins replaces a literal reading of the texts.

If the New Testament writers, inspired by the Holy Spirit and Jesus Himself, viewed the Creation account as reliable history, why would it be foolish for us—based on the claims of fallen, fallible human beings—not to do the same?

Further Thought: Read Gerald A. Klingbeil, ed., *The Genesis Creation Account and Its Reverberations in the Old Testament* (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Andrews University Press, 2015).

“The Bible is the most comprehensive and the most instructive history which men possess. It came fresh from the fountain of eternal truth, and a divine hand has preserved its purity through all the ages. . . . Here only can we find a history of our race, unsullied by human prejudice or human pride.”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 5, p. 25.

“I have been shown that without Bible history, geology can prove nothing. Relics found in the earth do give evidence of a state of things differing in many respects from the present. But the time of their existence, and how long a period these things have been in the earth, are only to be understood by Bible history. It may be innocent to conjecture beyond Bible history, if our suppositions do not contradict the facts found in the sacred Scriptures. But when men leave the word of God in regard to the history of creation, and seek to account for God’s creative works upon natural principles, they are upon a boundless ocean of uncertainty. Just how God accomplished the work of creation in six literal days he has never revealed to mortals. His creative works are just as incomprehensible as his existence.”—Ellen G. White, *Spiritual Gifts*, book 3, p. 93.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 When scientific explanations about present reality—what can be handled, heard, seen, tested and retested—are filled with debate and controversy, why do so many people unquestionably accept every scientific proclamation about events that supposedly occurred millions or even billions of years ago?
- 2 Modern science works on the assumption (a reasonable one on the face of it) that you cannot use supernatural means to explain natural events. That is, you can’t try to explain, for instance, a famine by claiming that a witch put a curse on the land. However, what are the limitations of this approach when it comes to the Creation account as depicted in Genesis? In other words, the Genesis account was a purely supernatural event. If, however, you automatically rule out the supernatural as the means of creation, then why will any other model you come up with, of necessity, be wrong?

Key Texts: *Job 26:7–10; Genesis 1; Genesis 2; Genesis 5; Genesis 11; 1 Chron. 1:18–27; Matt. 19:4, 5; John 1:1–3.*

Part I: Overview

In 1872, while conducting research in the basement of the British Museum, George Smith translated an ancient Babylonian tablet that contained references to Utnapishtim, the survivor of the worldwide Flood, and to Gilgamesh, who sought to attain from him the secret to eternal life. Newspapers around the world reported the astonishing discovery of the Gilgamesh Epic and the first-ever reference to the Flood outside of Scripture. Since then, scholars have documented worldwide Flood stories from cultures around the world. Creation accounts have been found, as well. As these new archaeological discoveries during the last 150 years have uncovered such evidence, new questions have arisen about the origin and nature of the Creation and Flood accounts in the Bible. Is the biblical account of Genesis 1–11 simply borrowed from the ancient Near East? Does it contain mythical elements common to the other accounts? If the Genesis account is dependent in some way on the earlier accounts from Mesopotamia or Egypt, what are the implications historically and theologically? How does one explain the similarities and differences found in the different accounts? How do these accounts speak to the question of cosmology, or the origin and structure of the universe? Is the Bible also to be considered a mythological text like those from Egypt and Mesopotamia? These and other questions will be the topic of this week's study as we explore the Bible against its Near Eastern and Egyptian environment.

Part II: Commentary

Illustration

Galileo Galilei concluded that the sun was the center of the solar system, with the earth and the other planets revolving around the sun (heliocentric worldview). But there were others in the Catholic Church who taught that the earth was the center of the universe (geocentric worldview). This led to a trial by the Inquisition, in which Galileo was forced to recant and was placed under house arrest until his death in 1642. The Galileo affair has often been cited as an example in which the Bible holds back science. But this raises several questions. Did the church's interpretation, which

was used to condemn Galileo, really derive from the Bible? Was Galileo opposed to the Bible in favor of science? In fact, the Catholic Church had adopted a cosmology based on Greek Aristotelian philosophy and Ptolemy's mathematics, which it then tried to defend on the basis of the Bible. Galileo responded by defending his interpretation on the basis of the Bible, as well. First, he asserted that God is the author of both nature and the Bible. If properly understood, they would be in harmony. Second, Galileo pointed out that later interpreters can err. Then he stated that the language used in the Bible is adapted to the common person and should not always be taken in a literalistic way. Finally, he argued against the consistency of the literal reading of Joshua's insistence that the sun stand still over Gibeah (*Josh. 10:12*), in light of the prevailing Ptolemaic view that the earth always was still and stood in the center of the universe, because in that case the day would have been shorter, not longer (Richard J. Blackwell, *Galileo, Bellarmine, and the Bible* [South Bend, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1991], pp. 68, 69). Today there is no doubt which interpretation was correct. But it took the Catholic Church more than 350 years to exonerate Galileo, which it did in 1992.

The lesson for us is that the Bible interpreter must not read the Bible through the lens of the cosmologies of the ancient Near East, Egypt, Greece, or the latest modern worldview. When there are difficulties of understanding, then careful consideration of the context, language patterns, and sense of the biblical passage is important.

Scripture

Does the Bible contain an antiquated view of cosmology? For centuries, critical scholars thought that Genesis 1 reflected the ideas of the ancient Babylonians. Thus, they insisted that the term *těhôm*, "deep," derived from the name *Tiamat*, the goddess of the primeval ocean world in the *Enuma Elish* epic. The epic depicts the Babylonian god Marduk slaying Tiamat in mortal combat. Today it is recognized that *těhôm* is simply a term for a large body of water that is completely nonmythical. In fact, it is "impossible to conclude that *těhôm* 'ocean' was borrowed from *Tiamat*."—David Toshio Tsumura, "Genesis and Ancient Near Eastern Stories of Genesis and the Flood: An Introduction," in *I Studied Inscriptions From Before the Flood: Ancient Near Eastern, Literary, and Linguistic Approaches to Genesis 1–11*, eds. Richard S. Hess and David Toshio Tsumura (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1994), p. 31. To suggest that Genesis 1 reflects a pagan conflict between the gods is to read into the text something that the text actually combats. The description of the passive, powerless, and unorganized state of the "deep" in Genesis 1:2 reveals that the term is nonmythical in content and antimythical in purpose.

The term *rāqîa'* is sometimes translated "firmament," from the term *firmamentum* in the Vulgate Latin translation of the Old Testament, which gives a false impression that the firmament is a solid metal dome. However,

the term *rāqia'* is better rendered “expanse,” as can be seen in Psalm 19:1 and Daniel 12:3. Likewise, does rain literally come through the “windows of heaven” (*Gen. 7:11, Gen. 8:2*)? In other passages, barley (*2 Kings 7:1, 2*), trouble and anguish (*Isa. 24:18, 19*), or blessings (*Mal. 3:10*) come through the “windows of heaven.” These expressions are clearly nonliteral and serve as metaphors in the same way that the saying *windows of the mind* is used today. If the Bible is read and interpreted on its own terms, it is usually not difficult to detect and recognize such language. Attempts to read into Scripture some kind of three-storied universe with a metal dome containing windows held up by pillars with an underworld below is to take that which is intended as nonliteral within the context of these passages and to interpret it literally. In fact, the Bible writers intentionally separated themselves from such mythical ideas that blended the realm of the gods and humans. We can refer to this intention as a polemical approach to the myths of the ancient Near East and Egypt.

Creation by the Word. “And God said, Let there be light: and there was light” (*Gen. 1:3*). This mode of Creation is in direct contrast to the ancient myths. In *Enuma Elish*, Marduk creates by gruesomely splitting Tiamat. In the *Atra-Ḥasis* epic, humankind is created from the flesh and blood of a slaughtered god mixed with clay. In Egypt, creation of man comes as the result of self-generation or emanation from the gods. But in Genesis there is no hint of deity in humanity itself. Humans are separate creatures from God.

Sea creatures. On the fifth day of Creation (*Gen. 1:20–23*), God created the “great whales” (*KJV*) or “great sea monsters,” as more recent translations (*RSV, NEB, NASB*) render the Hebrew term. In Ugaritic texts, a related term appears as a personified monster, or dragon, who was overcome by the goddess Anath, the creator god. But God’s totally effortless Creation of these large aquatic creatures, as expressed through the verb “create,” stresses effortless Creation and exhibits a deliberate argument against the mythical idea of creation by battle or combat.

Seven-day week. “And on the seventh day God finished his work which he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all his work that he had done” (*Gen. 2:2, ESV*). In Egyptian cosmologies there is no finality to creation. Rather, the cycle of recurrent creation of the sun god Amun-Re takes place daily. This concept of life and death is so intrinsic to Egyptian thinking that death itself is seen as part of the normal order of creation. A Twenty-First Dynasty funerary papyrus shows a winged serpent with the caption “death, the great god, who made gods and men”—a “personification of death as a creator god and an impressive visual realization of the idea that death is a necessary feature of the world of creation.”—Erik Hornung, *Conceptions of God in Ancient Egypt* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982), p. 81.

The exalted conception of the Genesis account of Creation presents, at its center, a transcendent God who, as supreme and unique Creator, speaks the world into existence. The center of all Creation is humankind as male and female. The Genesis cosmology unveils most comprehensively the foundations on which the biblical world reality and worldview rest. Genesis gives us a picture of totality that sets the entire tone for the rest of Scripture. Scripture is able to speak about the events of the end because He who made all things at the beginning is still sovereign over His creation (see further Gerhard F. Hasel and Michael G. Hasel, “The Unique Cosmology of Genesis 1 against Ancient Near Eastern and Egyptian Parallels,” in *The Genesis Creation Account and Its Reverberations in the Old Testament*, ed. Gerald A. Klingbeil [Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2015], pp. 9–29).

Part III: Life Application

The idea that the Bible is an antiquated book with little relevance to the major questions of the twenty-first century is prevalent in our culture today. The evolutionary worldview derives, in large part, from the mythical idea that there is no distinct boundary between humans, the natural world, and the world of the divine. These are all one. In Hinduism, we evolve through reincarnation into another life-form when we die. God is in all and is all. According to Hinduism, there are 33 million gods as personified through nature. This concept goes back to ancient Egypt where there were 22,000 gods and where death and life were perceived as part of the great circle of life.

- 1. Why is it important for us as Christians to understand that we were created in a perfect, sinless state at a time when death did not exist? Why is choice, as described in Genesis 3, important? How was the wrong choice of one man, Adam, made right in the choice of the Son of man, Jesus Christ?**

- 2. How does an evolutionary theory of millions of years of the death and dying of one species after another in a holocaust of pain provide any hope for the future? If death was always the other side to life in this universe, could there ever be an existence without death?**

- 3. How is the Bible's teaching on life and death completely different from that of the other major world religions? In what way does Christ's physical death and bodily resurrection make all the difference in the world? Share why you have hope today in the promises found in Scripture.**
