

Disarming the Perceived Conflict between Scientific Fact and the Text of Genesis 1 Without Compromising Either One

"One must accustom oneself to the Holy Spirit's mode of expression" (Martin Luther).¹

*Contemporary*² fundamentalists commonly contend that the only God-honoring way to understand Genesis 1 is to interpret it “literally.” This essay will evaluate and challenge that assertion in light of the authority of the very Scriptures they are seeking to protect.

While the doctrine of inerrancy holds that the Bible is without error, our adherence to this position is a matter that is separate from discerning whether a given biblical passage (specifically Genesis 1) is *intended* to be read “literally.” For example, no one takes Psalm 98:8 (“*Let the floods clap their hands; let the hills sing for joy together*”) literally, even though it too is God-breathed Scripture (2 Tim. 3:16). Neither does inerrancy directly bear on whether Gen. 1 is of such a nature that scientific knowledge *must* yield to its authority in cases where the latter describes the same subject matter differently.³ Thankfully, there is another standard by which these matters may be validly adjudicated -- the text of Genesis itself! This is a plumb line on which every party to this debate ought to gladly focus. Based on its *actual* text, I will argue that biblical revelation and scientific speech do not in principle conflict, for the reason that they employ different, yet compatible, modes of conveying truth about the same phenomenon.

One of the most famous photographs in the chronicles of *scientific* discovery is named “Earthrise.”⁴ It records the first time in history that human eyes have ever witnessed our home planet rising above a horizon. I can’t imagine a better title for the photo, named as it was by NASA scientists. Yet one might ask, is it appropriate for *scientists* to speak this way?



Suffice it to say, if NASA really believed the earth was rising *literally*, it would never have reached the moon so that this picture could be taken! Indeed virtually every person with even modest scientific knowledge understands today that it is the moon which *circles* around the earth which, in turn, circles around the sun which, in turn, circles around the Milky Way. Nevertheless “Earthrise” retains its name precisely because it employs the inspiring power of *phenomenal* language (PL), as opposed to the exactitude of *analytical* language (AL). To define these words in reverse order, AL refers to the language of the laboratory where precision in

¹ Jaroslav Pelikan, ed. *Luther’s Works*, “Lectures on Genesis Chapters 1-5.” (American Edition), v. 1 (Concordia, 1958), p. 47.

² Contrary to popular opinion, the founders of fundamentalism, in contrast to today’s fundamentalists, were not inclined to young-earth creationism. (Michael Keys. “*Darwinism, Fundamentalism, and R.A. Torrey*.” <http://www.asa3.org/ASA/PSCF/2010/PSCF3-10Keas.pdf>).

³ I oppose this position in my paper, “How Romans 1:18 Challenges YEC.” See my website, <http://www.christianityontheoffense.com>.

⁴<https://www.bing.com/images/search?q=earthrise&view=detailv2&id=3D62679F24E180A400301F47AE4AA2177D8E2FC5&selectedindex+15&cqid=ResQmf7T&simid=608023819575560753&thid=OIP.M45eb1099fed33fb9da783960e04b2624H0&ajaxhist=0>

mathematical formulas ($E=MC^2$) and scientific vocabulary (Carbon has six protons) is required. PL, on the other hand, pertains to the means by which a casual observer *describes* natural phenomena (a starry night) and events (a football game). From William Anders' vantage point on the Apollo 8 space capsule, it was the latter mode which better expressed the earth's *apparent* ascent above the moon's horizon. So while PL is very effective in speaking truth in certain ways, literalism, by its very nature, is precisely what it is **not**. Generally, in terms of natural entities and the causal relationships between them, AL emphasizes "how" and "why" considerations while PL frames its considerations in terms of "who" and "what"?⁵

So then, which mode of expression do readers encounter with the *actual* text of the Genesis creation account (GCA) in Gen. 1:1-2:3? Let it firstly be noted that by the very nature of a *24-hour* day as Young-Earth creationists (YEC) interpret the term "day," the events narrated in each of the six days *must* have occurred suddenly. What logically follows from that premise is that creation through any lengthy natural processes⁶ is dismissed out of hand. Yet it is precisely that position which negatively prejudices an investigation into which genre it is that is employed to narrate each creation day. I argue that the text itself contains many indications that the GCA is not describing 24-hour days.⁷ Consequently, it is my judgment that there are no limitations of time⁸ that might constrict God's creative activity to be found within the GCA.

A Literal Day-by-Day Summation of God's Creative Activity in Genesis 1⁹

- Gen. 1:1-2: "In the beginning God created [bara]¹⁰ the heavens and the earth." Initially, "*the earth was without form and void.*" There is **no reference** to duration for the events of 1:1, which happened prior to Day 1 (beginning later in 1:3).¹¹
- Day One: "God said, '*Let there be light.*'" Then He separated light from the darkness (3-4).
- Day Two: "God said, '*Let there be¹² an expanse¹³ in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from under the expanse from the waters which were above the expanse*'" (6-8).
- Day Three: "God said, '*Let the waters under the expanse be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear...*' [Then] God said, '***Let the earth put forth*** vegetation... [So] '***the earth brought forth*** vegetation, plants yielding seed... and trees bearing fruit in which is their seed..." (9-13— boldface mine).
- Day Four: "And God said, '*Let there be¹⁴ lights in the sky*'" (14-19).

⁵ Of course even scientists must at least begin their investigation with *phenomenal* considerations (what we see, hear, feel, etc.) before delving into analysis.

⁶I do not embrace macroevolution, though not for biblical reasons. I doubt evolution because the scientific evidence does not support it.

⁷ See my essay, "The Biblical Demand to Take Another Look," at my website, <http://www.christianityontheoffense.com>.

⁸ Ibid, Sections 4f and 5, p.7.

⁹ Based on the Revised Standard Version of the Holy Bible.

¹⁰ *bara* means creation by God out of nothing. See my paper, "Genesis 1:1 Anticipates Big Bang Cosmology," at my website. Op.cit. (7).

¹¹ At a gathering of the N.W. District of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod (June 23-26, 1964), the late LCMS professor Dr. Paul Zimmermann stated that if Genesis 1:2 "*lies outside the limits of the first day* [which indeed begins later with 1:3] *and indicates a preliminary activity, then certainly a great amount of time could be included in this verse*" (boldface mine). *Bible Science Newsletter*. (Caldwell Idaho).

¹² The word employed here is *yehee* (cause to appear); not *bara* (create out of God's fiat out of nothing) as in Gen. 1:1 (also, Hebrews 11:3).

¹³ *raqa*, (the sky).

¹⁴ Ibid.

- Day Five: "And God said, '***Let the waters bring forth*** swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth..." And God "created¹⁵ "great sea monsters" and other water creatures saying, 'Be fruitful and multiply...'" (20-23 – boldface mine).
- Day Six: "And God said, '***Let the earth bring forth*** living creatures according to their kinds: cattle and creeping things and beasts of the earth..." (boldface mine). Then God said, 'Let us make¹⁶ man¹⁷ in our image, after our likeness...' So "God created¹⁸ human beings 'in His own image, in the image of God He created them; male and female He created them'" (24-31).

Notice that days three, five, and six, suggest that God's creative activity entailed secondary causation ("*Let the earth [and the waters] bring forth...*") as opposed to His working *solely* through His direct command. Notice as well that, with the exception of the creation of the heavens and the earth in 1:1, the Hebrew word *bara* (create) does not appear in the narrative until the creation of soulish creatures on days 5 and 6.

In one respect Genesis 1 is very contents-heavy as shown by its following affirmations:

1. The creator of the universe ("*the heavens and the earth*") is the God of the Bible.
2. The entire universe was brought into existence *prior* to Day 1 (1:1-2).¹⁹
3. God transcends²⁰ creation. There is no reference whatsoever to idols in the account.
4. The universe had an absolute beginning from out of nothing (*creatio ex nihilo*).
5. The early earth was initially uninhabitable because it was entirely covered by water (1:9).
6. God did His creative work partly by decree ("God said, '*Let there be...and there was...*'") in 1:3, 6 and 9, and partly through *secondary* causes in 1:11, 20, and 24 ("God said, '*Let the earth [and waters] bring forth...*'") which on occasion implied extended time (1:12).
7. The barren earth ultimately came to be filled with a broad array of living creatures who filled the waters and seas, the land, and the skies (1:20-21, 24-25).
8. Life-forms were made "*according to [their] kind*" (1:12, 21, 24, 25).
9. God then created (*bara*) "whales" and other soulish (*nepesh*) water creatures²¹ (1:21).
10. God uniquely created (*bara*) human beings (*adam*) in His own image (1:26, 27).

Some of these assertions are not testable by scientific means (points 1, 3, 6a, 9, 10). Yet other affirmations are both testable (2, 4, 6b, 7) and in actuality do harmonize with scientific consensus except for point eight, which is unyieldingly rejected by Darwinists.²² Point four, pertaining to the beginning of the universe out of nothing, is also consistent with the scientific

¹⁵ *bara*, as in Gen. 1:1. Dr. Hugh Ross surmises that this word is employed here as an indication that *soulish* creatures are for the first time created. (Navigating Genesis: A Scientist's Journey through Genesis 1:11. (RTB Press, 2014), p.60f.).

¹⁶ *asah* (make).

¹⁷ *Adam*, in the absence of the article (the), refers to humankind as an entire race, both male and female.

¹⁸ *bara*, as in Gen. 1:1, is employed three times in this passage.

¹⁹ See my paper, "Genesis 1:1 Anticipates Big Bang Cosmology," at my website <http://wwwchristianityontheoffense.com>

²⁰ To "transcend" means to stand outside of and utterly apart from an entity which, in this case, is the physical order.

²¹ Ross. Op.cit. (15), p.60, states that *nepesh* "*applies to a creature capable of yearnings, emotions, passions and will; a self-aware creature.*"

²² For what I judge to be a devastating rebuttal of Darwinism, see Michael Denton. Evolution: Still a Theory in Crisis. (Discovery Institute, 2016).

consensus of our day.²³ It is further the case that the Bible has been right about this latter matter all along, while science only recently grudgingly conceded that the universe had a beginning.²⁴

Nevertheless notice that within the first chapter of Genesis there is marked absence of specificity with respect to the processes God employed in forming the world that He created. In light of this reality, the concept of literalness I introduced at the beginning of this essay fades into irrelevance for the reason that it has no interpretational role to play in this genre (PL).²⁵ Yet I hasten to add that its lack of specificity does not diminish the authority of the truth that Genesis 1 conveys. It is my central premise that PL and AL are both equally legitimate means of expressing truth, depending on the purpose that its communicator intends to fulfill. One mode of communication (AL) carries information that is useful when the goal to be achieved is of a technical nature, while the other mode (PL) more effectively advances *philosophical* and (for the purposes of this essay) *theological* clarity of a kind that leads to saving faith, moral transformation, and rational deliberation. Although both modes are vital to human endeavor as a whole, clearly it is the latter which serves the intentions of the writer of Genesis 1.

Indeed, *analytic* scientific discourse would have hindered the purposes of God (who obviously understands physics!) outright. But first, let us imagine for the sake of argument that God did choose to teach Moses a lesson in cosmology at a level that would please today's scientific community. Would the result have pleased the critics? No, for the following reasons:

- 1) The Israelites in 13th century BC would have lacked the conceptual background to include knowledge of a kind as would have conflicted with their reigning cosmological beliefs.
- 2) The knowledge which they would have received would be subject to later overhaul for the reason that scientific beliefs in any era are subject to modifying by subsequent discoveries.
- 2) Modern critics of revelation wouldn't be happy anyway. After all, committed naturalists aren't seeking *revealed* insight into the structure of nature that is designed, but the autonomy to investigate nature through the filter of its own prior *naturalistic* commitments.²⁶

Instead, God in His wisdom has chosen to declare Himself the Maker of the heavens, the earth, and all who dwell therein, in a way that is indeed fitting for *all* people in *all* times and places.²⁷

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²³ The Commission on Theology and Church Relations study, The Natural Knowledge of God in Christian Confession and Christian Witness, (The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, 2013), p.43, states that "Advances in astronomy during the twentieth century...led to the discovery that the universe...is expanding. This and related discoveries suggested, by projecting backwards, the now generally accepted conclusion that **the universe of space and time had a beginning in the finite past**" (p.59 n.215—boldface mine).

²⁴ Cosmologist George Smoot's Foreword to Fred Heeren. Show Me God: What the Message of Space is Telling Us about God. (Daystar, 2000).

²⁵ "Genre" in this context refers to a category of literature which, in this case is narration by means of *phenomenal* language.

²⁶ Access my paper, "Scientism is Not Science," at my website, Op.cit. (7).

²⁷ R. Payne Smith writes, "It is one of the **more than human qualities** of Holy Scripture that while written by men whose knowledge was in accordance with their times, it does not contradict the increased knowledge of later times" (Genesis, (Cassell, 1882). p.66—boldface mine).