

Genesis 1: Fact Or Fiction?

by **Earl L. Henn (1934-1997)**

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Probably the most ridiculed portion of the Bible is the first chapter of Genesis. Many have claimed that the creation account is contrary to proven scientific facts and cannot be reconciled with geologic and astronomical discoveries of the last few centuries. Atheists and agnostics have long used this section to prove that the Bible is just an unbelievable book of myths and fables. Even some who claim to believe the Bible's moral and ethical principles discount Genesis 1 as scientifically unreliable, relegating it to mere "Hebrew poetry"!

Objectors have these and other criticisms:

- » The Bible seems to say that God created light after the heavens and the earth (verse 3).
- » The sun, moon and stars seem to have been created after the earth (verses 14-18).
- » The mysterious band of water in the sky around the earth (verses 6-7) would defy known laws of physics.
- » None of these things could be possible based on what we know about the structure of the universe, the earth's relationship to other heavenly bodies and various physical laws.

How do we answer these criticisms? Is Genesis 1 meaningful? Can we believe it? Does it harmonize with or contradict proven scientific facts? Does it describe how the great Creator made the earth and the universe, or is it just a pretty poem that He thought would dress up His Word?

Jesus Christ states that "the scripture cannot be broken" (John 10:35). If Genesis 1 can be proven to be false, misleading and contrary to proven scientific facts, then we cannot depend upon anything else in the Bible either. The very veracity and dependability of God's Word are at stake!

Keys to Understanding

As with other portions of the Bible, certain keys unlock our understanding of Genesis 1:

1. The creation account is a very brief, condensed version of what actually happened when God created the heavens and the earth. God did not fill in the details.
2. Its focus is on how God prepared the earth for human habitation. The creation of other portions of the universe is treated as incidental to making the earth ready for mankind.
3. It is narrated from the viewpoint of an observer on the earth's surface. This is the most important key to understanding Genesis 1. Most people view the creation account from the opposite direction: of someone in outer space looking down on the earth. Misunderstanding the proper frame of reference causes most of the confusion over this portion of Scripture.

With these principles in mind, let's start at the very beginning. In Genesis 1:1, Moses writes, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." In these ten words, he simply states that God created all that exists. At this point the four-dimensional space/time continuum (length, height, depth

and time), in which we all exist, was created. This was literally the very beginning of time and the beginning of matter, energy, atoms, molecules, light, heat, stars, galaxies, planets, the sun and moon as well as the terrestrial globe we call the earth. All the basic building blocks that needed to be created to prepare a planet upon which life could exist were made at this time.

What God does not tell us here is very important. He does not tell us *when* this creation took place. Nor does He tell us *how* He created these things. He does not tell us *how long* it took for Him to create everything included in Genesis 1:1. Because God does not answer any of these questions, we can only examine the physical evidence from geology and astronomy, and come to our own conclusions on these matters.

Some may use Exodus 20:11 to say that God created everything in six days: "For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day." However, "heavens" refers to the earth's atmosphere, not to outer space. The Bible recognizes three heavens (II Corinthians 12:2). The first heaven is the earth's atmosphere; the second, outer space; and the third is the throne of God.

As stated earlier, the entire focus of the six days of creation is on preparation of the earth for human habitation. In Exodus 20:11, God is saying that He made 1) the heavens (earth's atmosphere), 2) the earth (land), 3) the sea (bodies of water) and 4) everything in them (living organisms). The focus of this scripture is on God's making the earth fit for human and animal habitation wherever they were designed to live.

Without Form and Void

After Genesis 1:1, the entire account deals with the preparation of the earth for human habitation. All the heavenly bodies, the laws of physics and chemistry and the necessary building blocks of the universe required to support life have been created and set into motion.

Verse 2 pictures the earth as a cold, dark, uninhabitable place covered with water: "The earth was without form, and void; and darkness was on the face of the deep." Why would this be? Other scriptures indicate that God originally created the earth perfect and beautiful and ready to be inhabited (Job 38:4-7; Isaiah 45:18). And since the sun had already been created, why would the earth be dark?

The best explanation for this condition is that a great destruction had occurred when, sometime in prehistory, Helel and his angels rebelled against God's authority and tried to overthrow Him (Isaiah 14:12-15; Ezekiel 28:12-16). This great war (Revelation 12:7-8) apparently caused an enormous amount of destruction to occur in the solar system. The resultant interplanetary debris and dust, some of which descended into earth's atmosphere, prevented the light from the sun and moon from reaching the earth.

The First Day

Then came a dramatic moment in history: "And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters" (Genesis 1:2). God was preparing to refurbish the earth (Psalm 104:30) and make it a suitable place for habitation. He was about to begin His great plan of reproducing Himself through the human race!

This statement also gives the reader the proper point of view to observe God's handiwork. Since the Spirit hovered "over the face of the waters," we should regard God's creative acts from the position of someone on or near the earth's surface.

In verse 3, God begins to create. "Then God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light." He now cleared away the debris and dust in space and in the atmosphere so that sunlight could penetrate to the earth's surface. An observer on the earth would immediately see the darkness brighten; it would appear that someone had just turned on a giant flashlight. Though the flashlight (the sun) had always been shining, its light could now be seen because God had removed the particles that had blocked it.

Yet, even though the atmosphere was translucent, it was not transparent. Conditions on the earth then were somewhat like those on Venus today. The sun's heat and light could penetrate the atmosphere, but heavy clouds, extending all the way to the earth's surface, enshrouded the planet. Anyone on the surface of the earth would feel as if he were in a thick fog. He could see light, but because of the fog, he would be unable to identify anything. Thus, the sun, moon and stars were not yet visible.

"And God saw the light, that it was good; and God divided the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness He called Night. So the evening and the morning were the first day" (verses 4-5). God describes His adjustment of the earth's rotation speed so that the length of the day and night would be correct to permit the sustenance of life. He may have also adjusted the tilt of the earth's axis to cause seasons to occur.

The Second Day

Verses 6 through 8 are among the most controversial statements in the creation account.

Then God said, "Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters, and let it divide the waters from the waters." Thus God made the firmament, and divided the waters which were under the firmament from the waters which were above the firmament; and it was so. And God called the firmament Heaven. So the evening and the morning were the second day.

There has been much speculation about what this mysterious firmament was. Many different interpretations of these verses have been advanced to explain what God says here. Some have pictured a band of water around the earth, and they have postulated that this was the water that fell and caused the Noachian Flood. However, when one understands what was occurring, it becomes clear that Moses describes nothing mysterious or unusual in these verses.

"Firmament" is translated from the Hebrew *raqiya*, which is derived from *raqa* which means "to spread abroad, stamp or stretch." *Raqiya* means "an expanse." *Young's Literal Translation of the Bible* renders Genesis 1:6 as, "And God saith, 'Let an expanse be in the midst of the waters, and let it be separating between waters and waters.'"

Remember, clouds completely enshrouded the planet, and water inundated the whole earth. Because the sun's light and heat had not been able to reach the earth's surface before God cleared away the debris, the hydrological cycle—the process whereby water evaporates, rises to form clouds and later falls as rain—had ceased.

Now that sunlight could reach the surface, God set about to clear away the fog and mist and reestablish the hydrological cycle. In so doing, He caused the water that was in the fog either to rise and become part of the clouds or to precipitate as rain. He thereby "divided the waters from the waters" by creating an expanse of clear air between the watery surface of the earth and the water-laden clouds. This is plainly stated in verse 7: God "divided the waters which were under the firmament [the oceans] from the waters which were above the firmament [the clouds]."

"And God called the firmament Heaven." This is the first heaven as verse 20 clarifies: "Let birds fly above the earth across the face of the firmament of the heavens." Since birds fly between the earth's surface and the clouds, the firmament must be the expanse of clear air we call our atmosphere. An observer of this process could now clearly see the expanse of the sky from one horizon to the other. However, as clouds still covered the earth, the sun, moon and stars could not yet be seen.

On this second day of creation, God probably adjusted the atmosphere's composition to contain the correct amount of nitrogen, oxygen, carbon dioxide, water vapor and inert gases necessary for photosynthesis and the sustenance of life. This would be vital in preparing for the events of the third day.

The Third Day

Verses 9-13 describe the events of the third creation day, on which God formed the ocean basins and the continental land masses: "Let the waters under the heavens be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear" (verse 9). Geologic evidence shows that over time the great land masses have "drifted" across the face of the earth. Apparently, in this renewing of the earth, God configured the land masses to suit His plan for the families of humanity.

Finally, in verses 11-12, God creates the first life forms: grass, herbs and trees. Since the creation of vegetation is not mentioned anywhere else, it seems reasonable to conclude that God created all forms of vegetation on this day.

The Fourth Day

The events of the fourth day are also controversial. Some claim that verses 14 and 15 simply repeat what God said in verses 3 and 4. However, note the difference:

- » "Let there be light"; and there was light. (verse 3)
- » "Let there be lights in the firmament of the heavens to divide the day from the night; and let them be for signs and seasons, and for days and years; and let them be for lights in the firmament of the heavens to give light on the earth"; and it was so. (verses 14-15)

In verse 3, God describes the creation of conditions to permit light to penetrate the earth's atmosphere. In verse 14, God is being very specific about certain "lights" that became visible from the surface of the earth. These specific lights were created to serve "for signs and seasons, and for days and years."

On the fourth day, God made visual observation of the sun, moon and stars possible. Before this, the earth's cloud cover did not permit an observer on earth's surface to see these heavenly bodies. God diminished the cloud cover so that clear days would be possible, and thus heavenly bodies could be

used to keep track of time. Once time was regulated, men could determine when to observe God's holy days. Most likely, God also adjusted the speed of the earth's revolution around the sun as well as the moon's speed of orbit around the earth.

Many people find verses 16-18 particularly difficult. They appear to say that God created the sun, moon and stars on the fourth day of creation. The New King James compounds the problem by incorrectly beginning verse 16 with "*Then* God made," implying continuity of action. The King James, American Standard, the Revised Standard and Young's Literal translations all start this verse with "And."

Further, the Hebrew *asah*, translated "made" in verse 16, is in the verb form that denotes completed action. This means that the sun, moon and stars could have been created that day or any previous time. These heavenly bodies had been created long before the creation week began. Therefore, verses 16 through 18 are parenthetical statements that indicate that the sun, moon and stars had been made sometime in the past.

The Fifth and Sixth Days

Verses 20-23 describe the creation of the first animals, the fish and other animals that live in the ocean and birds that fly in the air. God creates land animals in verses 24-25. It is interesting that God does not specifically mention the creation of flying insects, fungi, bacteria and many other living things. This is because the creation account is a very brief, condensed version of what happened. We know from many other scriptures (e.g., Exodus 20:11, John 1:3) that God is the Creator of everything that exists.

Finally, in verses 26-28, God creates human beings. On the sixth day He produced the acme of His physical creation, for whom He had refurbished the earth. Everything that He made was designed to carry out His plan to reproduce Himself through the creation of the human race. From this point, the great drama of human existence began to unfold.

The Seventh Day

However, God had one more thing to do. As a memorial of His great creation, God created the Sabbath by resting on the seventh day (Genesis 2:1-3). Like placing a capstone on everything He had made, God's creation of the Sabbath serves as a continual reminder that He is the great Creator. The Sabbath is a great blessing to mankind (Mark 2:27), as it keeps us constantly aware that God's greatest work is not the completed, physical creation but the ongoing, spiritual creation of Himself in us.

So we see that the creation account is not a compilation of myths and fables after all. Nor is it just a beautiful poem. When properly understood, Genesis 1 harmonizes with all the known laws and principles of the universe. It illustrates how the great God carried out His marvelous act of creation with love, care and concern for every creature.

When we contemplate how God designed and fashioned everything, we cannot help but be filled with wonder and thankfulness to God. We can truly appreciate, not only the beautiful world He has given us to live in, but also the amazing spiritual work He is continuing to do in us.