

Three Strategies for Interpreting Genesis

📖 Various
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When I was in the university, I went in a Christian, and I was under the impression that the Bible was true. My parents taught me this, my church taught this. We didn't get into the details of the creation vs evolution debate or any of that, but in my college biology classes it was quite clear that modern evolution was opposed to biblical creationism. They obviously saw the tension and considered creation to be a religious view that contradicted science. Yet, in the church at large, it was either not discussed or it was not considered a big deal; we could just endlessly reinterpret the Bible to fit the evolutionary model and this was no problem, or so we thought. What was striking was that the evolutionists saw more clearly the tension than Christians. What exactly is the tension? Well, if we start with the Genesis text and interpret it literally then it is in conflict with the story of Evolution. Think with me through this list. Here is a list comparing what we find in the Genesis creation narrative and what we find in the evolution narrative. This is not a figment of my imagination, this is just the factual material, one starts with God; the other starts with gas. That's the beginning, the starting point. Next we have cool liquid water; the other has hot condensing matter. Third we have the sun and stars created after plants; in evolution we have the sun, stars billions of years before plants. These are pretty different stories. It doesn't take more than a 3rd grade education to see we have a little problem here. Fourth, creation says birds and fish were created before mammals; evolution says birds and fish evolve after mammals. Fifth, man is created from the dust of the earth and woman from the man; vs evolution which says man evolved from mammals. Try to get those two together. The woman created from the man. Sixth, rain occurs after man is created vs evolution, which says, rain was occurring for millions of years before man. Hmm...Can we get these two stories together? Are these compatible?

Creation	Evolution
1. In the beginning God	1. In the beginning gas
2. Cool liquid water	2. Hot condensing matter
3. Sun and stars after plants	3. Sun and stars before plants
4. Life created on earth	4. Life evolves in sea
5. Birds and fish created before mammals	5. Birds and fish evolve after mammals

6. Man created from dust and woman from man	6. Man evolves from mammals
7. Rain occurs after man is created	7. Rain occurs millions of years before man
8. Creation processes turned off on Day 6	8. Evolutionary processes continue today
9. Differences in kind	9. Differences in degree
10. Death is abnormal	10. Death is normal

Number seven is crucial, if you don't get all the others, get the next three, because these are fundamental differences that we will see over and over and over. The processes of creation, or the mechanism God used to create, was turned off on day 6; evolutionary processes continue today in the further creation of life. They call this uniformitarianism. This means that the biological, chemical and physical processes that we observe today, are uniform through space and time. That means that these processes were the same in the distant past as they are today, such that I can observe a process today and assume that process, that rate, was the same in the distant past, so I can extrapolate back in time what things must have been like, how long ago things took place, etc.... That's uniformitarianism. But in creationism, turn to Gen 2:1-3, the processes that God used to create were turned off at the end of the sixth day, meaning we can't observe the processes at work during those six days. Here's how we know that. Let's read Gen 2:1ff, and count how many times you see the verb for complete, finished, or however your translation reads. "Thus the heavens and the earth were completed, and all their hosts. By the seventh day God completed His work which He had done, and He rested on the seventh day from all His work which He had done. Then God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it, because in it He rested from all His work which God had created and made." So He's no longer making things like He did in creation week. Creation is not a continuing process. It's a finished process, no longer open to analysis by human observation, human instrumentation, etc... That's a major difference with evolution which insists that the processes at work today have been, are and will always be the same, so that we can extrapolate back in time as well as into the future what things will be like. This has powerful implications about how you interpret data. Eighth, another big one, creation says there are differences in kind. That means there is a barrier between certain birds, fish and animals, they can't transmute across the barrier; whereas in evolution, birds, fish and animals all differ in degree and are related by procreation, there are no barriers. This is not a little point. In one of the verses we went through last week, 1 Corinthians 15:39-42, Paul argued that the resurrection body was a different kind of body than our present body on the basis of the creation of different kinds. So if there is no fundamental difference, only a difference in degree, then our resurrection bodies aren't really much different than our present bodies. So it's not a little point, it's a major point. Finally, the ninth difference we'll point out, in creation, death is abnormal. When God first created He created everything "very good." There was no death, no suffering, no pain, no tears. Death didn't enter until later. Death entered when man sinned. So death is an abnormal thing introduced into the creation. But in evolution death is normal, pain is normal, tears are normal, they're just part and parcel of the survival of the fittest in the upward development and progress of life. In other words, death is an essential

component of new life spawning. So don't get upset about it. Don't be frustrated by suffering. Just accept it. That's necessary. That's very different than what the Bible teaches. So, I presented that to show you the tension that you get into when you read Genesis creation narrative vs when you study the evolutionary story. And the question is, how have Christians dealt with this? There are three basic ways they have dealt with this and we want to go through these.

The Capitulation Strategy

These tensions really began in Christians during the 19th century. The Chain of Being was a doctrine already well-established in the minds of the thinkers of those days, but it was not detected by many Christians how much of a threat modern evolution was. As they thought about it, they began to say, "Wait a minute, we got a problem here, what are we going to do about these differences?" The first strategy that was invented was the Capitulation Strategy. What I mean by that is they capitulated to evolution, they surrendered their beliefs in creation and succumbed to the pressure of the evolutionists. The group who capitulated are known as the liberal church. This is the 1800's and early 1900's. At the time they were called the modernists and the conflict was between the fundamentalists and the modernists. But today we call the modernists the liberals. They were in denominations that had already drifted away from orthodox theology, so they had no problem buying into evolution in every way. They bought into more than just biological evolution, they bought into the idea of social evolution and progress and upward development. So when they went to Genesis how do you think they read it? As if it evolved over time. The liberal scholars, starting with Wellhausen in the 18th century and some others, began to apply a technique of interpreting the Bible that is called "higher criticism." That means they came to the Bible as if it was just a human document and tried to explain how it was put together. So they axed from the very start the idea that God could have spoken into history to these guys and had it written down. But they were intrigued by the Bible. As they did this they compared Genesis with other ancient literature, and assuming, note the word, assuming that everything evolved, they assumed that more simple forms of worship like polytheism evolved into the more complex and higher monotheism. In other words, the human race began polytheistic and as man evolved man's religion evolved and monotheism evolved. So they liked to compare these documents and explain the Bible's monotheism by evolution from previous pagan documents. The problem with this is that Wellhausen and these other scholars couldn't show any clear linkages between certain aspects of OT worship in Israel and the surrounding pagan nations. In other words, certain elements in Israel's worship just suddenly appear on the scene, with no precursors, so that didn't fit very well with evolution's gradual step-by-step changes from precursors. In fact, it was found that in the fundamental beliefs, the OT Bible was completely at odds with ancient pagan documents. It couldn't have evolved from them. But these liberal churchmen were under the guise that it could, so what are they going to do with Genesis? Well, it's not God's word, it's just man's ideas, so we are right to interpret it in terms of the other ancient pagan documents. Let me show you how they did this in Genesis 1 and 2 because this is still taught in many colleges, many religious courses in public schools,

and in many churches, and they use this to undermine your faith. One of the classic arguments of liberal theology can be detected when you hear the guy saying something like this, "The Bible has multiple accounts of creation, and particularly there are two accounts of creation, there's one account in Gen 1 and there's a completely different account in Gen 2." And usually a lot of naïve Christian students sit there in the class and say, "Hmm...I guess there are contradictions in the Bible?" But if they're smart enough they say, "Now wait a minute, if the Bible has contradictions it can't be true."

Here's how the teachers try to dupe you. Turn to Gen 2:9 and at the same time look at verse 19. What they do is they say, "In Gen 1 which came first? Animals or man? Animals, then man. But look in Gen 2:15, the man is mentioned first, "Then the LORD God took the man and put him into the Garden to cultivate it and keep it." Then look in verse 19, "And out of the ground the LORD God formed every beast of the field and every bird of the sky, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them," and the teacher joyously, proudly and confidently pronounces, "See, I told you, in Gen 1 it says God created animals first and then man, and in Gen 2 it says God created man first and then animals. So there's a contradiction in the two accounts of creation." Well, not so fast. Let me back up and show you.

When you interpret literature, any kind of literature, you do it all the time, when you get a letter, when you read a piece of literature, what is your first thought when you come to any text? That if a guy took the time to write it, presumably he meant to communicate something, it's not just nonsense. So if somebody wrote the text, you give the guy the benefit of the doubt that he probably intended to mean something coherent. You don't start your interpretation of a piece of literature trying to rip it to shreds; you start your interpretation presuming that the author probably meant to communicate something coherent. That's why we write, that's why we talk. In this case we have a style of writing, and we are all acquainted with this if we've ever gone out to the front lawn and picked up our morning newspaper. We call it journalistic style. Now when you write a news story, when you read a news story, any news story, it records events in time. Does a journalistic style start with a headline and give you strictly chronological events? Think about it when you read a news story. Or, does the journalist summarize in the first paragraph what happened, go back to details, summarize, maybe pick up another theme, summarize that, hop over here and develop another theme? Ever see that style used? Does that mean that the journalist has contradictions in his story? Or is it a style of writing? Archaeological discoveries of ancient Near Eastern works show an ancient style being used, called "doublets" like Genesis 1-2. In this style the author gives a chronological account and then goes back and pulls out the key ideas and expands upon them. That's exactly what Genesis does. In Genesis 1 we have the chronology. In Gen 2 we have an elaboration on key ideas. There's not two accounts of creation.

Let's go further and look at the structure of Genesis 1. Scholars have noted a neat structure in Genesis 1. Anyone know what structure that is? Okay, on Day 1 God makes the light. Day 2, sky and waters above. Day 3, dry land and plants. Day 4, sun, stars, moon, the light bearers. Day 5, what two groups? Birds and fish. And what did he do on the sixth day? Animals, man. Do you notice anything significant about this comparison? Do you see a pattern or structure? What is it? What does it mean?

1. Light	4. Light-Bearers
2. Sky and Waters	5. Birds and Fish
3. Land and Plants	6. Animals and Man

On days 1-3 He creates, as it were, the room, the sphere or space, and on the other side He populates the room, the sphere or space. On day 1 there was light, but no light bearers until day 4, so day 1 corresponds with day 4. On day 2 He creates the sky and the waters below, but there was nothing populating the sky and waters below, so on day 5 He populated the sky with birds and the water with fish. On day 3 He created the land and plants on the land, but there was nothing populating the land, so on day 6 He created animals and man to populate the land and to have plants to eat. So, it's very organized, it's the work of an engineer who creates a domain and then populates the domain. This doesn't look thrown together as the liberals suggest.

So, we've discussed all this to say that one strategy of dealing with modern evolution and Genesis creation is to capitulate, just wholesale give into the evolutionary framework and re-interpret the Bible to fit. But there are no precursors in pagan literature to the features of OT Israel's worship, there are sometimes similarities, but at every point there's a stark difference, and if you do that, you wipe out the very carefully laid out structure of Genesis 1.

The Accommodation Strategy

Having seen this strategy of unbelief, let's move to the second strategy, the Accommodation Strategy. This is the idea that we don't have to throw the Bible out like the capitulation folks did, we can still hang onto the Bible and somehow re-interpret it to fit modern evolution. It's been called Theistic Evolution, and it's the idea that God used the evolutionary process. Most Christians are in this camp. They either don't see the implications of this or they haven't thought this thing through very clearly. They have bought into a presupposition and that is coloring how they interpret the Bible. So, I want to read you a quote from the professor of Church History at Dallas Theological Seminary, Dr Hannah. Dr Hannah did an interesting research project where he went back into the 19th century and took America's most famous theological quarterly, called Bibliotheca Sacra and dug out old articles dealing with the issue of science and Genesis. What strategy were they using in the 1850's to deal with the claims of science? And it's clear they were using this Accommodation Strategy. In 1846 here's what one

Christian wrote, an outstanding Christian scholar, "Natural revelation is the basis on which written revelation rests." Do you know what they're saying in that statement? They're saying that we begin with the scientific study of the world and then after doing that we interpret Scripture accordingly. This became endemic to the whole Christian church. That was the starting point they operated from. Science tells us how the world works, so we've got to interpret the Bible to fit. So, every time science changed and added more time or changed the mechanism of inheritance, guess what theologians had to do? Go back to Genesis and re-interpret. Now, over time, what does that do to the validity of the Bible? It undermines it. Basically, what happened was they bought into the inerrancy of science. Science became the tool to unlocking the Bible. In the 19th and early 20th century virtually everyone from Charles Hodge to C. I. Scofield to Bernard Ramm bought into this. It was universally accepted, even in fundamentalist circles. Quite frankly, about the only people to hold the line were some Seventh Day Adventists, which is kind of interesting. But it was this strategy that led to the various ways of getting more time in Genesis. As one clergyman said, "Moses seems to assign a comparatively brief period to the creation; astronomy and geology assert a vast period, how shall they be reconciled?" Several accommodation theories have been used. First, the Pre-Creation Chaos where there was a creation prior to Genesis 1:1 to allow for more time, unspoken, but had to be there. Second, the Gap Theory where Gen 1:1 describes a prior creation, Gen 1:2 the judgment of that creation and a long period of time between the two verses, after which Gen 1:3 describes a re-creation in six, 24-hour days. Third, the Day-Age-Day theory which means each day is 24 hours, but there are long periods of time between the days. Fourth, a Day Age theory which postulates that each day was a long period of time. That view is now being espoused by a number of people at a foundation called Biologos under the title Progressive Creationism. Fifth, the Framework Hypothesis, which notices the structure we pointed out, but overlaps day 4 with day 1, day 5 with day 2, and so forth, so it's just a literary structure and has nothing to do with time. All these are Accommodation Strategies to deal with what? The embarrassment over the Bible not lining up with modern scientific conclusions. So they try to say it does. As Mayers said in the 1850's, "If the Mosaic record is...reliable, we must admit an interpretation which will give the period the facts demanded." See, they assumed the conclusions of science were "fact". This is what was going on 150 years ago. This is nothing new and unfortunately it's still going on in evangelical circles. Dr. Hugh Ross is perpetuating this. Dr Norm Geisler is perpetuating this. Big names are perpetuating this.

Well, what's the answer to this thing? Just think about this for a minute. We've just compared Genesis and Evolution side by side and what did we find? Do they fit? What was wrong? The sequence. Is adding more time between the days going to change the sequence? No. Is making the days longer going to change the sequence? No. You can add all the time you want to but the sequence is still wrong. Think about it. Does any evolutionist in his right mind agree that the stars didn't come into existence until after planet earth? I never read an evolutionist that believes that. It is impossible to interpret the Genesis text in terms of the modern evolutionary story, even if you make each day billions of years. And besides, there's one fundamental mistake with the days becoming long ages and that is, at the end of each day the text says, "there was evening and morning the xth day" and that

formula does not allow for anything except a 24-hour day. No Hebrew scholar, including liberal Hebrew scholars who could care less about the Bible, interprets this formula to mean anything more than a normal 24-hour day. They all know what it's saying, the liberals just don't believe it. But at least they admit it. The accommodationists just try to endlessly reinterpret it. So, all this strategy has done is cast a shadow of doubt on the infallibility and authority of Scripture because if we keep re-interpreting Genesis every time science makes a new claim, then after a while we might as well say that the Bible is not the infallible source for interpreting the data, but the data have to be interpreted by men first, then we can interpret the Bible correctly. Question? Is the Bible that unclear? If it is we have a serious problem.

Counter-Attack Strategy

The last strategy is called the Counterattack Strategy. This is the one that's created a storm of controversy in the country. It was begun, oddly enough, by men who were trained in secular science. It didn't come out of Christian seminaries; I always find this story intriguing. These guys were Christians, but they were men trained in the sciences, and as Christians they said, "Hey, we're not blind, we can see what Genesis is saying and we can see what evolution is saying and we know you can't get the two together." The father of the movement was a guy named Dr. Henry Morris. Dr Morris was the head of the Civil Engineering Department at Virginia Polytechnic Institute. So he was well-respected. He concluded that if the Bible could not justifiably be 're-interpreted' to fit evolution, and if it was the word of God, then the problem, somehow, must be with the scientific interpretation of data. Somewhere science had taken a wrong turn because science was begun as a Christian endeavor. Modern science was begun by Christians, men of God who understood that God was the Creator and so, on that basis, they expected to find designs and patterns in creation, so they were looking for those patterns so they could exalt the one who created them. But now, strangely enough, science had been hijacked and was now against the Bible. Morris said, "Science is doing something to the data, they're not neutral when it comes to interpreting data, they're deliberately and consciously interpreting it in a way that excludes God." He was bold, this man put his career on the line and posited that the Bible is the authority, not just in spiritual matters, but in earthly matters as well, in the unseen and in the seen. It's not true that we interpret earthly things independent of Scripture; it's quite the other way around; we interpret Scripture, God's word, which is a clear revelation, and it tells us how to interpret the earthly things, just as it tells us how to interpret the spiritual things. The Bible is the authority over every area of life. This is a corollary truth to creation. If God has created everything, spiritual and earthly, then He has spoken to everything, spiritual and earthly, and his word comes first. And ever since the argument has continued, but the battle lines have been drawn; which comes first, man's independent investigation apart from God's word, or God's word? Which is the final authority? And we think the final authority is God's word, and that the data are being manipulated by the opposition, so that we are not hearing facts but a philosophical interpretation of the facts that is in opposition to God. Of course, this is a titanic claim,

and it's extremely offensive to the unbelieving world. It's why creationists are considered buffoons and non-thinkers and the radical right and all the rest of it.

So, today I just wanted to show you that the church has been through a mess the last 200 years and they have settled into these positions. And you have a choice to make, either you're going to capitulate to unbelief, which is to presuppose the inerrancy of modern science and uniformitarianism, or you're going to accommodate by endlessly re-interpreting Genesis to fit the latest scientific claim, or you're going to go on the counter attack, claim the Bible comes first and it's the tool that helps us interpret the data.

A final word of warning, if you decide to hold the counter attack position, if you stand up for the bible first, you're going to be labeled an ignoramus. If you can live with that, great. It's a stupid response. But I can live with it. And I'll stand toe to toe on the issue with anybody. I'm not afraid to disagree with the official pagan mythology. And, by the way, this is the most important question to answer correctly. The most important question is not about Jesus. It's about origins. You know why? Because it goes back to the most fundamental issue. How did we start this series a few weeks ago? Origins controls your view of God. Origins sets you up for how you interpret everything else in the Bible. And if you dump the Biblical story of origins you're going to end up re-shaping everything else in Scripture; marriage, the family, society, the atonement, they all get re-shaped along with every other doctrine in the Bible. That's what's at stake. Don't fool yourself into thinking this is just one issue. As night follows day so the logic will catapult through the remaining pages of Scripture. And the ultimate result is you will lose your ability to live by faith. And that's the goal of this class, to get rid of all the garbage that is clogging up our ability to live by faith. So, you have the freedom to choose which way you go on how to interpret Genesis, but once you have chosen, you've locked in on a concept of God that will color everything else you believe.