

## Genesis and Naturalism: Cognitive Dissonance

Scripture: Genesis 1–3

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You've probably heard of *dissonance*. It's a term normally employed by musicians to describe disharmony and disagreement between sounds. There is another term called *cognitive dissonance* used to describe similar discord in the world of ideas and beliefs. Maybe that's a good way to view the debate about origins in Genesis—cognitive dissonance.

The creation account in Genesis 1-3 demands to be taken at face value. Nothing about the text itself suggests it contains anything other than a faithful, literal, historical account of how God spoke the universe into existence—from nothing. That kind of literal hermeneutical approach to Genesis exposes all symbolic, poetic, allegorical, and mythical interpretations for what they really are, foreign ideas forced upon the text—but not without a cost, as discussed below. No honest handling of the biblical text can reconcile these chapters in Genesis with the theory of evolution or any of the other “scientific” theories about origins. The main thrust of the passage simply cannot be reconciled with the idea of naturalism.

Before we begin the discussion, here's what John MacArthur had to say about Genesis and naturalism in his book, *Battle for the Beginning*:

As humanity progresses through the twenty-first century, a frightening prospect looms. The church seems to be losing the will to defend what Scripture teaches about human origins. Many in the church are too intimidated or too embarrassed to affirm the literal truth of the biblical account of creation. They are confused by a chorus of authoritative-sounding voices who insist that it *is* possible—and even pragmatically necessary—to reconcile Scripture with the latest theories of the naturalists.

Of course, theological liberals have long espoused theistic evolution. They have never been reluctant to deny the literal truth of Scripture on any issue. But this trend is different, comprising evangelicals who contend that it is possible to harmonize Genesis 1-3 with the theories of modern naturalism *without* doing violence to any essential doctrine of Christianity. They affirm evangelical statements of faith. They teach in evangelical institutions. They insist they believe the Bible is inerrant and authoritative. But they are willing to reinterpret Genesis to accommodate evolutionary theory. They express shock and surprise that anyone would question their approach to Scripture. And they sometimes employ the same sort of ridicule and intimidation religious liberals and atheistic skeptics have always leveled against believers: “You don't *seriously* think the universe is less than a billion years old, do you?”

The result is that over the past couple of decades, large numbers of evangelicals have shown a surprising willingness to take a completely non-evangelical approach to interpreting the early chapters of Genesis. More and more are embracing the view known as “old-earth creationism,” which blends some of the principles of biblical creationism with naturalistic and evolutionary theories, seeking to reconcile two opposing world-views. And in order to accomplish this, old-earth creationists

end up explaining away rather than honestly exegeting the biblical creation account.

A handful of scientists who profess Christianity are among those who have led the way in this revisionism—most of them lacking any skill whatsoever in biblical interpretation. But they are setting forth a major reinterpretation of Genesis 1-3 designed specifically to accommodate the current trends of naturalist theory. In their view, the six days of creation in Genesis 1 are long ages, the chronological order of creation is flexible, and most of the details about creation given in Scripture can be written off as poetic or symbolic figures of speech.

Many who should know better—pastors and Christian leaders who defend the faith against false teachings all the time—have been tempted to give up the battle for the opening chapters of Genesis. An evangelical pastor recently approached me after I preached. He was confused and intimidated by several books he had read—all written by ostensibly evangelical authors—yet all arguing that the earth is billions of years old. These authors treat most of the evolutionists' theories as indisputable scientific fact. And in some cases they wield scientific or academic credentials that intimidate readers into thinking their views are the result of superior expertise, rather than naturalistic presuppositions they have brought to the biblical text. This pastor asked if I believed it possible that the first three chapters of Genesis might really be just a series of literary devices—a poetic saga giving the "spiritual" meaning of what actually occurred through billions of years of evolution.

I answered unapologetically: *No, I do not.* I am convinced that Genesis 1-3 ought to be taken at face value—as the divinely revealed history of creation. Nothing about the Genesis text itself suggests that the biblical creation account is merely symbolic, poetic, allegorical, or mythical. The main thrust of the passage simply cannot be reconciled with the notion that "creation" occurred via natural evolutionary processes over long periods of time. And I don't believe a faithful handling of the biblical text, by any acceptable principles of hermeneutics, can possibly reconcile these chapters with the theory of evolution or any of the other allegedly scientific theories about the origin of the universe.

Furthermore, much like the philosophical and moral chaos that results from naturalism, all sorts of theological mischief ensues when we reject or compromise the literal truth of the biblical account of creation and the fall of Adam.

I realize, of course, that some old-earth creationists *do* hold to the literal creation of Adam and affirm that Adam was a historical figure. But their decision to accept the creation of Adam as literal involves an arbitrary hermeneutical shift at Genesis 1:26-27 and then again at Genesis 2:7. If everything around these verses is handled allegorically or symbolically, it is unjustifiable to take those verses in a literal and historical sense. Therefore, the old-earth creationists' method of interpreting the Genesis text actually undermines the historicity of Adam. Having already decided to treat the creation account itself as myth or allegory, they have no grounds to insist (suddenly and arbitrarily, it seems) that the creation of Adam is literal history. Their belief in a historical Adam is simply inconsistent with their own exegesis of the rest of the text.

But it is a *necessary* inconsistency if one is to affirm an old earth and *remain* evangelical. Because if Adam was not the literal ancestor of the entire human race, then the Bible's explanation of how sin entered the world is impossible to make sense of. Moreover, if we didn't fall in Adam, we cannot be redeemed in Christ, because Christ's position as the Head of the redeemed race exactly parallels Adam's position as the head of the fallen race: "For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive" (1 Corinthians 15:22). "Therefore, as through one man's offense judgment came to all

men, resulting in condemnation, even so through one Man's righteous act the free gift came to all men, resulting in justification of life. For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so also by one Man's obedience many will be made righteous" (Romans 5:18-19). "And so it is written, 'The first man Adam became a living being.' The last Adam became a life-giving spirit" (1 Corinthians 15:45; cf. 1 Timothy 2:13-14; Jude 14).

So in an important sense, everything Scripture says about our salvation through Jesus Christ hinges on the literal truth of what Genesis 1-3 teaches about Adam's creation and fall. There is no more pivotal passage of Scripture.

What "old-earth creationists" (including, to a large degree, even the evangelical ones) are doing with Genesis 1-3 is precisely what religious liberals have always done with *all* of Scripture—spiritualizing and reinterpreting the text allegorically to make it mean what they want it to mean. It is a dangerous way to handle Scripture. And it involves a perilous and unnecessary capitulation to the religious presuppositions of naturalism—not to mention a serious dishonor to God.

Evangelicals who accept an old-earth interpretation of Genesis have embraced a hermeneutic that is hostile to a high view of Scripture. They are bringing to the opening chapters of Scripture a method of biblical interpretation that has built-in anti-evangelical presuppositions. Those who adopt this approach have already embarked on a process that invariably overthrows faith. Churches and colleges that embrace this view will not remain evangelical long.

**Here's the point:** when we reject a literal hermeneutic of the creation account in Genesis, all kinds of theological mischief follows. With that thought in mind, discuss the ramifications of holding a naturalistic interpretation of Genesis 1 and 2 as it relates to interpreting and applying the rest of Scripture. Remember, a naturalist is one who assumes the complete absence of supernatural and miraculous activity. Enjoy the thread!

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