

The Time Factor (Genesis 1:1-2:25)

We are told by Christian astrophysicists that the universe is between 13 and 15 billion years old. (Hugh Ross claims that the most up-to-date dating procedures place it at 13:73 billion years). Naturally those who argue that it is about 6 000 years old either dispute the dating methods or argue that it only *appears* to be old.

The “Big Bang”

According to astronomer David Block:

The most widely accepted model of our expanding universe is that of the ‘big bang.’ Unfortunately this phrase suggests that all matter once existed *somewhere* as a superdense ball of matter which suddenly exploded, scattering debris throughout space like an exploding bomb. But this picture is too simple. It presupposes that *space already existed* before the explosion and that the big bang was merely the mechanism that flung the stars and galaxies out into space. It suggests that before the bang there was empty space, like an empty room, with a highly concentrated dot of matter at its centre. It suggests that after the bang the galaxies moved out to fill space, like furniture fills a room.

But the big bang is also concerned with the *formation* of space itself! There was no ‘room’ within which the explosion could occur . . .

So, in cosmology, the big bang represents an interval of time in the early history of the universe when matter everywhere, at all points, was concentrated at immense densities and temperatures . . .

The big bang epoch marks the beginning of time as well as matter.¹

Referring to the “big bang,” Hugh Ross says: “In an instant, time, space, matter, and energy, along with the physical laws governing them all, came into existence from a source beyond the cosmos.”² Moreover, Ross insists that the bang is “an immensely powerful yet carefully planned and controlled burst of creation, a sudden release of power from which the universe unfurled in an exquisitely controlled expansion.”

¹David L. Block, *Our Universe: Accident of Design?*(Johannesburg: Starwatch, 1992), 7-8.

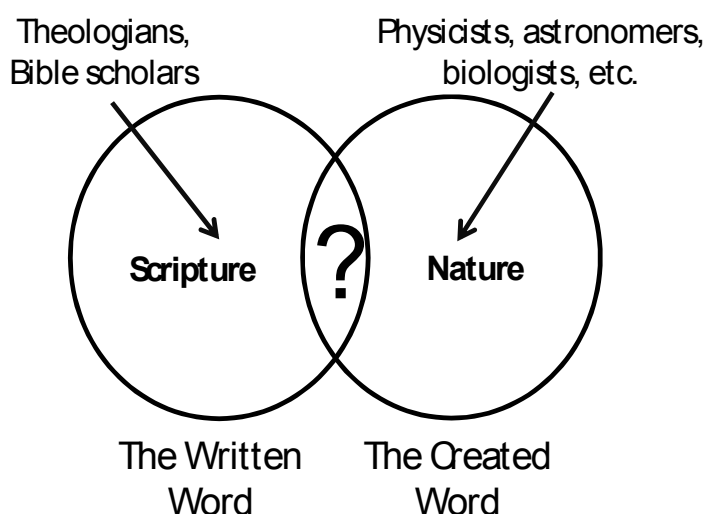
²Hugh Ross, *A Matter of Days: Resolving a Creation Controversy*(Colorado Springs: Navpress, 2004), 139.

He explains that while many big bang theories exist, “all big bang models share three fundamental characteristics:

1. Some kind of transcendent beginning a finite time ago.
2. A continuous cosmic expansion.
3. Ongoing cosmic cooling from an extremely hot initial temperature.”³

The idea that the universe in which we find ourselves has an origin (this was not always believed) is an inference from science which Christians understandably welcome. After all the Bible teaches that God created the entire universe. But if the universe is indeed 13.73 billion years (give or take a few million), what are we to make of the Genesis 1 account? It too speaks of creation, but it represents this as having taken place in six days.

You may recall that we used the following diagram to depict the relationship between God’s revelation in nature (read primarily by scientists) and God’s revelation in his Scripture (read primarily by theologians). There is not an extensive overlap because God’s revelation in nature is not the main subject of Scripture and we cannot deduce the truth concerning salvation from our observation of nature. Where there is overlap, there must be agreement if our science and our theology are good (if the respective communities are reading general (in nature) and special (in Scripture) revelation correctly).



Possible Approaches to the Genesis 1 Account

We are mistaken if we think that Genesis 1 is the only account of creation in the Bible. There is the account in Genesis 2, which some hold to be contradictory, but is clearly complementary and prepares the way for the Genesis 3 account of the fall. In addition we

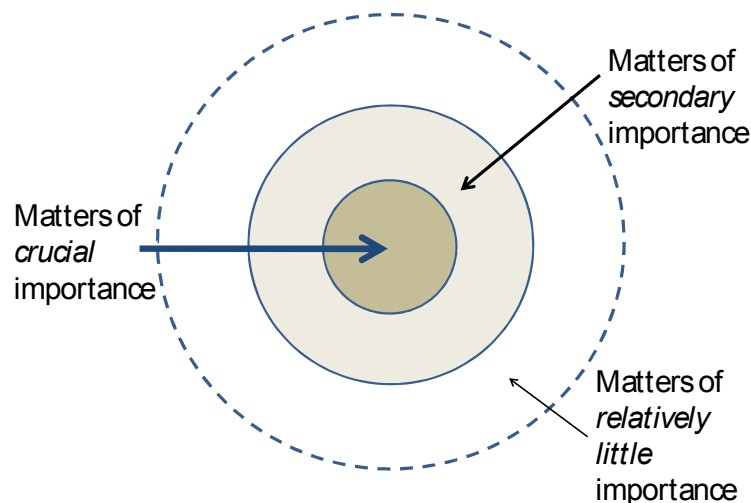
³Ross, *Days*, 144.

could cite passages such as Job 9:3-12; 38:4-38; Psalm 8; 19:1-6; 33:6-9; Prov 8:22-31; Isa 40:12-22, 25-28; 44:24; Matt 19:4-6; John 1:1-2, 10; Rom 1:18-23; 2:12-16; 5:12-17; 8:18-25; 1 Cor 15:20-28; Col 1:15-20; Heb 1:1-2; 11: 3; Rev 4:11. There are numerous passages that refer to creation or the created order; usually they simply declare or assume that God created the world or celebrate that fact. But Genesis 1 does more than that: it not only gives us more detail but also makes important assertions about creation.

But how exactly are we to read it? Let us assume that, as part of God's word, it conveys truth. It is reasonable for us to expect that to be common cause among Christians. Should we see it as a scientific account of *how* God created? Must we read it literally or may we think of it as metaphorical, a way of explaining what *actually happened* in story form? In other word, might the trees concretely *represent* genuine realities that are *no less real* than if Eve ate literal fruit? Or, to put it differently, was the problem that eve grasped an apple (yes, I know the Bible does not say it was an apple), or that she and Adam chose to disregard the instruction of their generous maker. If so, what were they actually doing? Was it more than simply-conceived disobedience? These are not merely academic questions. They go right to the heart of the nature of sin.

A healthy approach

If you have the misfortune of having to go to the emergency room at the hospital, it is probable that you will encounter a triage nurse whose responsibility it is to distinguish between those who need immediate attention and those who can wait in line to see a doctor. If only we applied this prioritizing principle to the truths of the faith, we would save ourselves a lot of trouble (and the Christian cause a lot of embarrassment). It works like this:



We major on majors and minor on minors. We distinguish between the non-negotiables, like the deity of Christ and justification by faith, and the secondary matters that are important, like the mode of baptism and exact form of church government, and tertiary matters on which we may well differ, like the precise interpretation of certain difficult but non-crucial passages, the order of events at the Lord's return and appropriate clothing to be worn to church services.

This principle of distinguishing between the really important and the not-so-important can be extended to our understanding of the events described in the passages before us. Some genuine believers take them as literal and factual accounts of what actually happened, and others see them as metaphorical. In other words, they describe what really happened but do so in picture form. Those in the latter category may say something like this: "Whether there were two literal trees with literal fruit is not so important (it is in the second or third of the concentric circles). But it is important that there is one God who created everything. He did so purposefully and he did so with mankind in mind. We were created in his own image (and however we understand that, it is obviously of huge significance). He provided for us in abundance and gave us the honor of looking after his creation. But he didn't make us his puppets. He gave us the capacity to act in freedom and to love him and one another and submit to him not just instinctively but by choice. For that to happen, there needed to be the opportunity of not doing so. We did not do so and the fall took place. In other words, mankind today is not mankind as God created us to be. Whether we take the passages literally or not, at the very least they teach this."

Now, it doesn't take much imagination to see how easy it would be to argue away essential truths because we get to explain the metaphors. But when we look to the teaching of the whole of Scripture, we discover how important it is that we do believe in such truths as the creation and the fall, the sinfulness of humanity and the goodness and grace of God. These are primary truths.

Some different ways of interpreting Genesis 1

I shall merely list and briefly describe these positions:

Young earth creationism

The universe, including the earth of course, was created in six twenty-four hour days about six thousand years ago. The appearance of age is the result of imperfect dating methods and/or the fact that Noah's flood was universal and accounts for geological and fossil records.

The gap theory

Genesis 1:1 refers to the dateless past (perhaps 13.73 billion years ago) but the rest of Genesis 1 refers to a "recreation," a preparation for the creation of mankind some six

thousand years ago. In this scenario, prehistoric animals like dinosaurs were part of the old creation. The Hebrew word translated “was” in Gen 1:2 (“the earth was formless and void”) can be translated “became,” and refers to a catastrophe that occurred. This is sometimes associated with the fall of Lucifer (who then became Satan). So the world was recreated and mankind brought into being to restore a planet on which there was already rebellion. But, alas, God’s intended restorer succumbed to Satan’s temptation.

The day-age theory

Genesis 1 provides us with a chronological account of God’s creative activity in non-technical terms. There is a direct correspondence between the epochs of creation and the days of Genesis 1.

The revelation theory

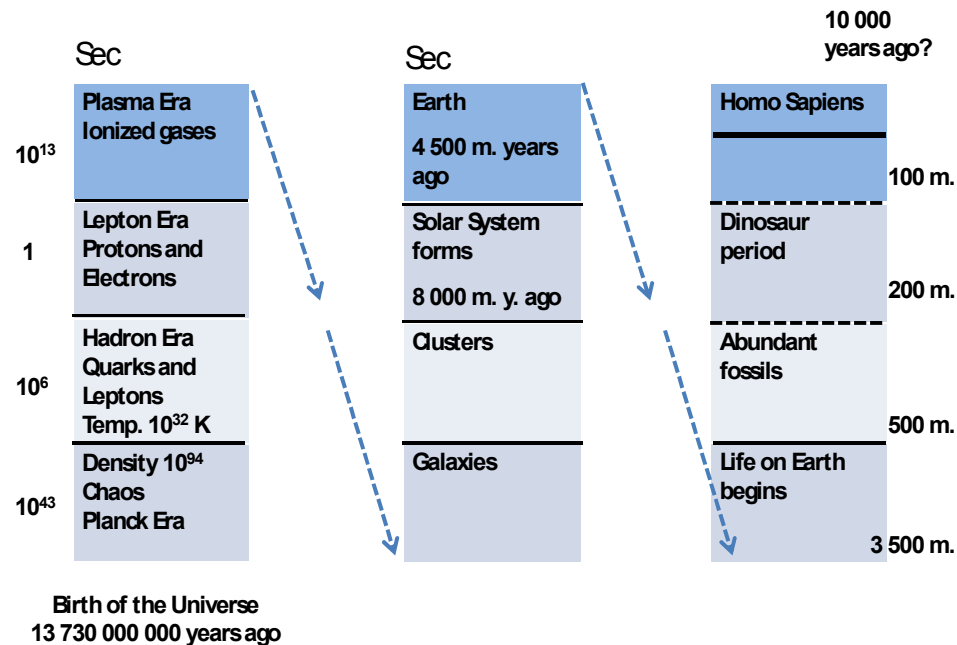
The days of Genesis 1 are indeed twenty-four hour days but they are days *of revelation*, successive days on which God showed Moses the truths concerning creation.

The theology-not-science theory

The purpose of the account is to assert important theological truths and set the stage for subsequent revelation. The passage makes no attempt to describe how God created – that’s not the point. It makes important assertions that we (but not everybody) tend to take for granted, for example, the entire created order was brought into being by God (the one and only God). There was both purpose and progression in his creative activity. He was pleased with his good creation. Mankind was made in the image of God as the crown of God’s creation and given dominion. These are first-order biblical truths. We ought not to isolate science from theology, but nor should we muddle the two.

The Time-Scale

Give or take a few hundred million years, here is a chart indicating a suggested time scale.



Evolution and “Evolutionism”

Inevitably, any discussion of creation leads us to the subject of evolution. My knowledge of the subject is limited but here are some options.

Flat denial

We may point to the absurdity of believing that we are the direct descendants of apes or reptiles (which, of course, theories of evolution do not say), point to the intricacy of the design of the human eye, ridicule the very idea, and see Darwin as a kind of antichrist who introduced a godless and dangerous idea that beguiles the world and causes Christians to compromise their faith. This is not clever! Nor is it God-honoring especially if we adopt a hostile attitude and are intent on loading our guns to fire across the border (Polkinghorne’s analogy).

Blind acceptance

At the other extreme, there are those who have seen a row of sketches, are aware of the widespread acceptance of the model, and believe that “evolution” (without discerning different models) must be true, end of story.

“Naturalistic” evolution

In an insightful chapter on the subject, John Collins distinguishes between the “evolution-as-the-big-picture” model found among many neo Darwinists, and what Darwin himself

taught. His real problem is with the notion that an entirely naturalistic explanation is sufficient to account for life's origin and all that has happened subsequently. He concludes, "Traditional Christian faith opposes not *all* ideas of evolution, but biological evolution-as-the-big-picture, with neo-Darwinism as its best representative." He opposes the idea of "an unbroken pathway from molecules to mankind, along strictly natural lines."⁴

"Theistic" Evolution

This is the view that God has chosen to use evolution to bring about the end result that he desired. Some see God as the original creator of life and the originator of the process which by natural laws would lead from lower to higher forms of life and ultimately to mankind. Others see God as working in a more interventionist way, stepping in to create new forms of life, and especially mankind. (This, of course, does touch on one's worldview. Just how involved is God with the world he created?) Theistic evolutionists of all stripes do not deny that there has been some (or much) evolution; they believe that God used this mechanism to bring about a desired result. We need to observe that the gap between creationists and theistic evolutionists is smaller than that between naturalistic and theistic evolutionists.

Comments from Two Committed Christian Scientists

It has been my privilege to know the two men whose comments I include. Both have lived exemplary Christian lives and are highly respected in their fields, namely, physics and zoology.

Louw Alberts

In an essay entitled "Life on Planet Earth," Alberts observes that "the advent of molecular biology has firmly established that the gap between life and non-life is unimaginably enormous . . . The advent of life on planet earth must be a divine miracle."

His approach is not to take cheap shots at the theory but to show that there are real problems with an entirely naturalistic construction of it. It would be naïve to assume that the atheistic portrayal of evolution is established beyond doubt. He points to the many unanswered questions in the fossil record, which does not reveal a gradual transition from one group to another. He also notes the circularity in the "survival of the fittest" model since the "fittest" are by definition those which survive. He argues that genetic mutations cannot account for quantum jump from a reptile to a bird or the huge progression from molecules to man. Ultimately, he concludes:

⁴C. John Collins, *Science and Faith: Friends or Foes?* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2003), 282.

Recognizing the advance toward higher life forms over the ages and accepting that there is very reasonable evidence that micro-evolution within groups has taken place, but also recognizing that there is a Creator who stepped in from time to time to cause major changes, would be an honest approach in terms of what we know and understand in the present day. This would not be contrary to the available scientific evidence or to the Bible.

George Branch

Branch identifies the four principles that underpin Darwin's theory:

- More individuals are born than survive to reproduce.
- Variety exists in all species.
- The chances for survival will be greater in those varieties which are better adapted to prevailing environmental conditions (while less fit individuals will tend to be weeded out by natural selection – “survival of the fittest”).
- If fitness is inherited by offspring, there will be a gradual change in the nature of the species as ongoing adaptation occurs.

He then asks, “Was Darwin right?” and concludes, “In terms of the four central tenets of his theory, there seems little doubt that he was correct.”⁵ George Branch is a highly-esteemed professor of Zoology, and a committed Christian. He was (and probably still is) a loved and respected member of a church I pastored in Cape Town. He concludes his essay (addressing the scientific community) with his own profession of faith: “I am not shy to declare my own (faith). I believe in a personal God and in the divinity of Christ, and that Christ lived on earth as a human being – as human as I am, but immeasurably more profound. I also accept the Bible as an infallible guide . . . but I do not believe it can be used as a scientific account of the origin of the earth and the development of life. I accept Genesis as a metaphoric story illustrating a great truth – that God created – but not a scientific account of how this took place.”⁶

⁵George M. Branch, “The Theory of Evolution: A Review of its Current Status,” C. W. du Toit (ed.) *Nature, God and Humanity* (Pretoria: University of South Africa, 1996), 212.

⁶*Ibid.*, 223.