

How I Read Genesis One and Two

Recently a pastor at a church I attend preached on the Genesis creation story. The title of the sermon was "Creation or Evolution." He drew a clear line in the sand and since I don't accept the view of the creation of the universe in six literal days about 6,000 to 10,000 years ago, I found myself on the wrong side of the line from his view. His decision was not based on ignorance of the scientific evidence, but it was a clear choice to take the Bible literally and to defend the 24 hour day meaning of the Hebrew word "Yom." I was perplexed by his sermon and decided I should give careful thought to how I read the Genesis creation story. I realized immediately that the question goes to the deeper issue of how I read the Bible and therefore the assumptions and beliefs that I hold regarding the book called the Bible.

I have read in and through the Bible, written in a variety of English versions, throughout my life starting as a young pre-teen. I also have read commentary on many parts. Here is how I read the Genesis story. First, I believe that the Bible is the inspired Word of God. I believe this not because of any scientific or historical evidence other than the Bible testifying to this reality. Confidence in the truth of the Bible comes by Faith, where for me Faith is a gift from God. "Faith comes by hearing and hearing comes by the word of God." Sure this is circular reasoning but it is not by reason but by God given Faith. Since for me the Bible is the inspired Word of God, I require that any part of the Bible must be in harmony with all other parts. That is to say God is One. Where the Bible appears to contradict itself I would fall back on the idea that there is an underlying truth that fixes the problem. God may only know the resolution for now but one should look for the deeper unifying message.

Second, I believe that the Bible is the Living Word of God. That is the Holy Spirit can reach into my heart and the heart of others to bring life giving knowledge through the very words on the page. As reason for not accepting this view I have had friends counter that there are various interpretations and versions and many language translations so we can't trust any of these Bibles. I believe, that God has the power to both use and preserve through the ages, the truth in all these version to reveal His Presence. Thus God uses the words to speak to peoples' hearts even with errors of translation to bring the good news of salvation through Christ Jesus.

Third, and this is the catch, I believe that scientific understanding of the reality of our world must be the context for understanding the claims of the Bible. As a trained scientist who knows the overwhelming evidence for deep time evolution of the universe and life I can only read the Bible in such a way that what is revealed about God, man (male and female), and all of creation must be harmonized with reality as I have come to know it and understand it. The flip side of this is that science can neither prove nor disprove the existence of God, nor can it substitute for Spiritual insight. Science reveals the Glory of God who is revealed to us in the Bible. I recognize the limitations of science and I am careful not hold science as the final

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arbitrator of truth. My Faith in the God of the Bible does not depend on scientific evidence for that Faith.

Consider the Copernican revolution and the “heretical” views of Galileo. The geocentric perspective of many passages in the Bible (along with mixing in the teachings of Aristotle), led the church to resist the concept of the earth as a sphere hanging in space and to reject the heliocentric solar system (which was the universe of the time). In their imaginations, Copernicus’ view just could not be true. In the same way many Bible believing Christians hold that the evolution of the species for some just cannot be true. Today, we accept without question that the Earth and planets revolve around the Sun, which revolves around the center of the Milky Way Galaxy, one of over 100 billion other galaxies. I and others now read the entire Genesis story with this “modern scientific view” in mind. I can do no less than hold the modern view of the evolution of the universe, and of life and Homo sapiens in mind as I read the Genesis story.

So what do I understand from Genesis 1.1 to 2.3?

First and foremost the very personal God of the Bible claims to be the Almighty Creator of the Universe. This God claims authorship out of nothing all that exists. Science tells us that all that exists had a beginning and is outrageously, large, empty, filled with energy and matter, filled with light and precisely designed from the beginning to support life on the planet Earth. I can say by science that what is today Homo sapiens appear to have evolved and that all living humans today appear to come from one genetic mother (mitochondrial Eve). I can accept the words, “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him, male and female he created them”. I can only imagine what it means to be created in the image of God but it appears from the Bible that it is connected to that eternal soul that God claims ownership of for all people and is part of God’s plan to have us as sons and daughters in his eternal kingdom.

Second, from Genesis 1.1 to 2.3 I see that God created order and relationship in all things. Consistent with science we know that all life is cellular and that the living cells have common biochemical mechanisms. Most amazingly all life is based on a chemical code that is shared in precise and integral ways in a molecular structure called DNA. From the science of ecology we see that we are imbedded in a web of life. From Faith we understand that God intended man to rule over Creation and live in harmony in the web of life. From faith we see that the Love of God must include Love of one another and by extension love of the creation.

Thus my knowledge of the natural world is a reality that must be considered in the reading of the Genesis story, which I now take to be God’s poetic declaration of creation.

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Now the reality of nature is not the only reality. There are other realities that impact the way we read the bible. For my pastor friend there is the reality of his life experience and ministry founded in his fundamentalist belief in the Bible as the Word of God to be trusted above all other realities.

I hold to the harmony of God's Creation and His Word and can go boldly forward reading the Bible and learning about the natural world confident that truth is found in this harmony.

Rollie Otto, March, 2012

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