

Why I Am Not An Agnostic

IMPORTANT: This lesson is the ninth part of an ongoing “chapter” on why I am not an agnostic. The earlier lessons are available in written, video, or podcast form at www.Biblical-Literacy.com. Those earlier lessons contain important information on different kinds of evidence, different kinds of arguments, as well as the paradigm used for analyzing the issues. That information is not repeated here, so those who are new to this series may want to go back and consider those lessons when evaluating my thoughts.

INTRODUCTION

There is a blessing and a curse that appeared in my life about 20 years ago. Email. In some ways it radically altered my life for good. Before the intrusion of this never sleeping giant, I would regularly have to telephone my office to “check in” and see if anything needed my attention. It meant I was on the phone almost hourly.

Once we figured out what email could do, the telephone check-ins faded into obscurity. I simply needed to check my emails. Fast forward 20 years. I get 350 daily reasons I must check my email. They pop up more regularly than fly balls at a baseball game.

Emails have brought to the surface some problems with current writing. For one, our fonts are limited. We have fonts that enable us to be **emphatic**, or should I type, *emphatic*? But we are missing fonts that indicate sarcasm. Certainly, there are folks who regularly use sarcasm, and as email became a popular channel for communicating in place of the telephone, sarcasm did not go away. It is still used. But, it can be hard to detect in an email.

Email can require us to try hard to figure out the tone of one’s writings. Internet websites can do the same. I remember well the first time someone sent me an article from the “news” website *The Onion*. I did not know that *The Onion* was a satiric website commenting on modern times and culture. While claiming to be “America’s finest news source,” you quickly learn it speaks only tongue-in-cheek.

Anytime we try to read something, our minds automatically tend to shift into an interpretative mode. It might be literal, it might be skeptical, or it might be imaginative. When it comes to books, we generally have the benefit of the book coming from a section denoted “fact,” or “fiction.”

The Bible contains an assortment of writing styles, many of which we commonly see today (narrative, historical dialogue, poetry, letters, etc.). Some of the writing styles were more common in the ancient cultures into which the Bible was written than what we have in 21st

century America (i.e., chiasm). It can, at times, make it a bit difficult to understand exactly what the writers had in mind when we read some challenging passages.

This becomes important when we examine the Bible and the issue of evolution. For the Jew and the Christian, the issue becomes how to read and understand the first several chapters of the book of Genesis. These are pages that were written before “pages” came to be. They come from over 3,000 years ago and likely from a language that gradually became the ancient Hebrew that molded much of the rest of the Old Testament.

For anyone, one of the key challenges is to read the creation pages from Genesis in their original cultural context, seizing on the concepts as they existed at the time of writing, to understand the message those pages were meant to convey. Then I can take the message and place it into my modern language, utilizing modern concepts and understandings of reality. Let me give an example of what I mean.

Historically, humanity observed the sun “rising” in the east and “setting” in the west. We use those terms still today, but as a visual comment on what we see. We no longer believe that the sun is actually coming up from the edge of the world and coursing or moving across the sky until it recedes at the opposite edge of the world. We might speak of the sun rising, but we know that the earth is actually rotating, and the sun is staying relatively in one place.

So the Bible will also speak of the “rising” and “setting” of the sun, not because the Bible is scientifically in error on cosmic geometry and motion. It is the language and mindset of the time when the Psalmist wrote, “From the rising of the sun to its setting, the name of the LORD is to be praised!” (Ps. 113:3).

So a primary goal in trying to assess what the Bible says about evolution is to determine what the Bible says about origins. We need to read the Bible in context, and I believe that as we do, we see a great deal of liberty in trying to decide whether and to what extent to believe in an origin of species creation, evolution, intelligent design, or most any other meritorious scientific understanding of origins.

This lesson is closely tied to last week’s and if you were not able to read it, you are urged to download the lesson at www.Biblical-Literacy.com. Last week, we discussed the uniqueness of the worldview of Israel as given in the first few chapters of Genesis. We contrasted those chapters with the worldview of Israel’s neighbors in what they say about God, nature, and humanity. This week we delve more deeply into the different ways to understand early Genesis, and then we probe Paul’s teachings about the cosmos and God gleaned from verses in his New Testament letters.

THE WARNINGS FROM AUGUSTINE:

Augustine (354-430) wrote a number of books on Genesis. He wrote two early books setting out the allegorical meaning, “not venturing to expound the deep mysteries of nature in the literal sense.”¹ Later, he decided to write on the literal interpretation, but he stopped before finishing because, “I collapsed under the weight of a burden I could not bear.”² Time allowed Augustine to write many more volumes on the literal meaning of Genesis, but still, in his final works, “one will encounter more questions raised than answers found.”³

Consider, for example, Augustine’s writing on what Genesis means by, “God called the light Day and the darkness Night.” Augustine could not figure out how there would be light/day followed by darkness/night. Although he did not understand that the globe was round, he did understand that the sun never truly went “out,” but instead shown over other places on earth. Without scientific certainty, yet challenging the apparent worldview of Genesis 1, Augustine wrote,

But if I make such a statement, I fear I shall be laughed at both by those who have scientific knowledge of these matters and by those who can easily recognize the facts of the case. At the time when night is with us, the sun is illuminating with its presence those parts of the world through which it returns from the place of its setting to that of its rising. Hence it is that for the whole twenty-four hours of the sun’s circuit there is always day in one place and night in another.⁴

Many find Genesis 1 and 2 perplexing chapters to understand literally. Some struggle to see how there was “day” and “night” or “evening” and “morning” (day one) before God made the “greater light to rule the day” and “the lesser light to rule the night” (day 4). For that matter, how does the earth sprout vegetation, fruit trees, and other plants the day before (day 3) he apparently makes the sun? Over the centuries, these issues have brought forth a number of suggested answers that satisfy some, but not all.⁵

¹ Augustine, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis, Volumes 1 and 2* (Paulist Press 1982), trans’d and annotated by John Hammond Taylor at 2.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.* at 3

⁴ *Ibid.* at 30.

⁵ For example, citing Revelation 21:23 (“And the city [New Jerusalem] has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb”) some believe plants in this world were growing by the light of God. Others counter that this created world is discussed in Genesis 1 and we do not see God as light in that way in this world. Furthermore, to some it seems pagan to place God into creation as a part of the physical realm rather than a Creator of the physical realm.

Those questions were hard on Augustine and science has not made them easier! Now that we understand that night and day stem from the earth revolving around the sun, we might similarly wonder how the earth was revolving day and night without a sun to revolve around!

I want to consider what Genesis says, but even more, what it does not say. For I have a range of ways in which to understand Genesis and still hold to an authoritative view of Scripture as inerrant in conveying what God wishes to convey in the way God wishes to convey it. There is comfort and warning in Augustine's words,

In matters that are obscure and far beyond our vision, even in such as we may find treated in Holy Scripture, different interpretations are sometimes possible without prejudice to the faith we have received. In such a case, we should not rush in headlong and so firmly take our stand on one side that, if further progress in the search for truth justly undermines this position, we too fall with it. That would be to battle not for the teaching of Holy Scripture but for our own, wishing its teaching to conform to ours, whereas we ought to wish ours to conform to that of Sacred Scripture.⁶

We begin by trying to understand the Genesis account, and then consider the teachings of science.

What does Genesis say about God and evolution?

When we consider the interplay of science and faith, the areas of scripture that are most readily implicated are those of the early Genesis stories (especially creation), as well as those of miracles and the supernatural aspects of demons and disease. So, with an eye toward science, and seeing the limitations of space, my focus here turns first to Genesis 1-2:3.

The creation material in Genesis is worthy of a massive multi-hundred-page tome, more so than a few dozen pages in a lesson series. Exhaustive material cannot be presented in this limited format, so my goal is directed differently. The point of this study is to explain why the concepts of science, evolution and the like, do not drive me away from a belief in God or the Bible. For the atheist to place me in a box of thinking I must embrace either God or science is not fair. I can and do fully embrace both, and I believe the Bible does as well.

With that goal in mind, and with the limitations of space, here I consider certain aspects of the Genesis passage relevant to the discussion at hand, and leave aside some of the more detailed debates.

⁶ *Ibid.* at 41.

For example, there is a debate among scholars as to whether the first line in Genesis should be translated, “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth” (ESV) or something like, “When God began to create heaven and earth.”⁷ Although there are some implications for the creation/evolution dialogue in which translations are chosen, it is not so significant that I dwell on it here. I merely note that there are plenty of places to study it!⁸ My goal is met simply by setting out enough of the Creation passage to give it context and, in the process, addressing several of the more cited areas of dispute.

At first glance, it might seem as if there are two different creation stories. In fact, many biblical scholars assert that there are. Genesis 1-2:3 speak of the seven days of God’s creation and rest. God made light and separated it from darkness on day one. On day two, God made an expanse called “heaven” and separated the waters above from the waters below. The third day, God took the waters below the expanse (below heaven) and gathered them into one place so that dry land appeared. God called the land “earth” and the waters “seas.” God then had the earth bring forth vegetation, plants yielding seed and fruit trees.

On day four, God set lights in the heavens to separate day and night, and to establish seasons. God specifically made the two great lights, the sun to rule the day, and the moon to rule the night, as well as the stars, setting them in the expanse called heaven. On day five, God created great sea creatures and every living creature that moves in the water. God also made the birds that inhabit the sky. God blessed the creatures and said for them to be fruitful and multiply.

Day six is when God created the living creatures of the earth. God then made man after his own likeness and in his image. God created man as male and female. As with the fish and birds, God issued the command to be fruitful and multiply. Day seven is a day without creation; it is the day God rested. God blessed the seventh day and made it holy.

We reach now Genesis 2:4 where it seems a second creation story is given. No longer is “God” the acting subject, but now it is the “LORD God” (adding “Yahweh” – LORD – to the Hebrew for God). Chapter two speaks of the LORD God making man at a time “when no bush of the field was yet in the land and no small plant of the field had yet sprung up—for the LORD God had not caused it to rain on the land, and there was no man to work the ground, and a mist was going up from the land and was watering the whole face of the ground—” (Gen. 2:5-6).

God does not provide rain until the flood of Noah, but he does make man! The LORD God creates man from the dust of the ground, breathes the breath of life into his nostrils and **then** plants a garden in Eden, placing man there. Man is given the charge of working the garden. In chapter one, God made plants on day three, and man on day six. Chapter two

⁷ Alter, Robert, *Genesis, Translation and Commentary*, (Norton 1996) at 3.

⁸ Collins, C. John, *Genesis 1-4: A Linguistic, Literary, and Theological Commentary* (P&R Publishing 2006) at 50ff.

seems to reverse the order with man coming *before* plants. This adds to the consideration that perhaps the stories reflect two different traditions. If not two different stories, then perhaps we have a writing style that is calling into emphasis different points and also helping inform how the stories should be read.

Closer examination of the creation passages brings out several important things. First, we should note that Genesis 1-2:3 is written in a different form or style than the rest of Genesis. The “seven days” passages are written in what one scholar has termed, “exalted prose narrative.”⁹

The passages take a repetitive form that is structured quite beautifully. Day after day begins with, “And God said...” (Gen. 1:3, 6, 9, 11, 14, 20, 24, 26). That is repeatedly followed by a statement, “Let there be...” (Gen. 1:3, 6, 14) or simply “Let the...” (Gen. 1:9, 11, 20, 24). Whatever God had declared to happen then occurs and God notes that it is “good” (Gen. 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25), and at the end of his creating, “very good” (Gen. 1:31). After each day’s creating work, “evening” comes, followed by “morning” (Gen. 1:5, 8, 13, 19, 23, 31). Here, we see that something is missing from this regimental repetition. On the seventh day, there is no note of “evening and morning following the activity of the day (God’s rest)!”

There is another interesting aspect to the creation days. They fall into two easily discernable categories, those of “forming” and “filling.” On days 1, 2, and 3, God forms and he fills those forms on days 4, 5, and 6. See the relationship in the chart below.

<u>Forming</u>	<u>Filling</u>
Day 1: light (day) and darkness (night)	Day 4: the sun (filling day) the moon/stars (filling night)
Day 2: heavens and waters	Day 5: birds (filling heaven) fish (filling waters)
Day 3: earth/vegetation	Day 6: animals and man (filling earth and eating vegetation)

This takes on greater significance when we see the verse before the days of creation where it reads, “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void.” The heavens and earth are made, but they are formless and void. Then for three days God forms the heavens and earth, followed by three days where he fills the voids in those forms.

Again, as with the absence of “evening” and “morning,” day seven is different. It is neither a “forming” nor a “filling.” It is a holy day of rest. Reading these days in this structure

⁹ Collins at 71-72. Collins also speaks of the “poetic parallelism” and “poetic diction” of Gen. 1:1-2:3.

shows God's carefully planned provisions for his people. He first builds good habitats and then fills them.

With chapter 2:4, we have the first of eleven verses in Genesis to bear the refrain, *toledot*. This Hebrew word carries the translation, "These are the generations of..." Over and over, it seems to indicate a focus on material that follows as a narrowing of attention on a matter set out earlier. We might consider it as a modern chapter heading.¹⁰ This is one of many factors that lead many scholars to see the creation focus in chapter 2 of Genesis as a microscope that intensifies the focus on the creation of man and woman, rather than simply a second or independent tradition of creation.

Once we reach this part of the creation text, the writing shifts from the high exalted, almost poetic structure of Genesis 1:1-2:3, and becomes ordinary Hebrew prose.

INTERPRETATIONS

How should one fairly understand these passages in Genesis? That surely makes a difference in whether we consider them at odds with science. Are they literal? If so, **how** literal? If they are not literal, what are they?

- **"Literal"**

I put literal in quotes because it takes different forms in the minds of different people. Some believe that God literally made the world in six successive 24-hour days, followed by a 24-hour day of rest.¹¹ Typically, this view also takes the genealogies and associated dating in Genesis 5 as literal as well, resulting in a view that the earth is somewhere around 6,000 years old.

Others take this section as literal, holding to six 24-hour days, but not necessarily considering the days successive. In this view, great time periods might have existed between the various days of creation. This is also called the "intermittent day view."

Still, another view that holds to a literal interpretation has been termed the "gap theory." This view focuses on the first two verses of Genesis:

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.

These verses are not seen as simply a prelude or introduction to the verses of Chapter 1. Instead, they are interpreted as an independent aspect of creation that took place a

¹⁰ Collins at 36, 40-41; Hamilton, Victor P., *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1-17 (New International Commentary on the Old Testament)*, (Eerdmans 1990) at 2-11.

¹¹ See, e.g., Hamilton at 53.

considerable time before the six days of creation. God created the heavens and the earth, all sorts of history occurred, and then came a destruction that left a formless void of darkness. Into this came God with the creation detailed in the following verses.

A literal view more so than other views, can be seen to set the Biblical story at odds with what science teaches in origins. For example, how can one have vegetation (day 3) before the sun (day 4)? Of course, there is always the recourse to the God who is able to do it anyway he chooses. However, I should note that an interesting aspect of the literal interpretation is often overlooked. Namely, the passages tell us that the earth was told to bring forth vegetation and plants, animals, birds and fish, but it does not tell “**how** the earth ‘brought forth vegetation’ or how the animals appeared in their respective environments.”¹²

This has brought some to believe that the six creation days are listed in an artistic order rather than the order of creation. The numbers assigned are not seen as sequential, but rather as identifying tags. An example of this is given in comparing Matthew’s account of the temptation of Jesus with Luke’s. Matthew has Jesus tempted first with hunger, then at the pinnacle of the temple, then with the kingdoms of the world (Mt. 4:1-10). In Luke, the order is flipped. Luke has the hunger, the kingdoms and then the pinnacle of the temple (Lk 4:1-13). This, it is argued, is an example of how the Bible can record history accurately, but change ordering of events to make a point.

The point in Genesis is frequently seen as the “form/filling” structure that was set out earlier. In that regard, Collins writes,

We may simply conclude from this high level of patterning that the order of events and even lengths of time are not part of the author’s focus...In this understanding, the six workdays are a literary device to display the creation week as a careful and artful effort.¹³

Collins later adds that he sees “the highly patterned form of this pericope [the form/filling texts] as evidence that the reader is invited to sit lightly on sequence and time lengths.” Importantly, one of evangelicalism’s leading and most out-spoken inerrantists J. I. Packer recommends this commentary as a “model of good reading of the text.”¹⁴

- **Day / Age**

A second view, which is fairly called “literal” as well, is that which considers the Hebrew word “day” in the first chapter to mean an “era” or an “age” as opposed to a 24-hour day. This view stems from the fact that the Hebrew word used (*yom*) can mean a 24-hour day,

¹² Collins at 44.

¹³ See, e.g., Collins at 73ff.

¹⁴ See the endorsement by Packer on the back cover.

an era or age, or even more limited, it can mean the time of daylight.¹⁵ Our English word is used similarly today. Scripture does teach, of course, that God is outside of time. As a result, our “days” are certainly not the same to him!¹⁶

To make such a determination in Scripture, the scholar or student needs to look at the context. In the framework of Genesis, there are two dominant aspects to the text that are cited favorably by those who ascribe to this view. First is the description given for the seventh “day.” That is the only day where the day does not end! The other six days have the conclusion that would have followed the workday of any Jew, “evening and morning.”¹⁷ But on the seventh day, we are told that God blessed it, and made it holy because he rested on that day. We are never told that it was followed by evening and morning.

Many understand this to mean that we still live in the seventh day, the day (or “age”) of God’s rest. In this sense, Hebrews 4:3-11 is used to show the idea that as believers, we “enter God’s rest” as opposed to those who do not get that blessing:

For we who have believed enter that rest, as he has said... For he has somewhere spoken of the seventh day in this way: “And God rested on the seventh day from all his works” ... So then there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God, for whoever has entered God’s rest has also rested from his works as God did from his.

This view that the seventh day was not simply 24 hours, but was an age/era carries over to the other days as well.

A second indication that is used to justify the age/era interpretation is found in Genesis 2:4:

These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created, in the **day** that the LORD God made the earth and the heavens.

¹⁵ Hamilton at 54. The basic and most frequent usage of the Hebrew *yom* (“day”) is referring to the time of daylight between sunrise and sunset (for example, Gen. 8:22). A lesser usage, but one that is still quite common, is a full 24-hour day (for example, in Numbers 7:12-78). Further, “in many cases *yom* loses the specific meaning “day” and becomes a rather general and vague word for ‘time, moment’.” Jenni, Ernst and Westermann, Claus, ed’s., *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Hendrickson 1997) Vol. 2 at 527-529.

¹⁶ See, e.g., Psalm 90:4; 2 Pet. 3:8.

¹⁷ “Evening and morning bracket the night (see Num. 9:15 where ‘the appearance of fire’ was over the tabernacle *from evening until morning*; in verse 16, we find this paraphrased as ‘the appearance of fire [covered the tabernacle] *by night*.’ Hence, night is the period from evening to morning), and this is the daily time of rest for the worker. In Psalm 104:23, when the sun rises, ‘man goes out to his work, and to his labor until the evening.’ Collins at 77.

This passage then goes on to speak of the creation of man, the creation of plants (or the planting of the Garden of Eden), naming all the animals, searching for a mate, the deep sleep of man, and the creation of woman. Those events, it is argued, did not all occur within 24 hours and this indicates that “day” is meaning something more.

- **Allegorical**

Another way that the creation passages have found interpretation by those who ascribe to a high view of Scripture is as allegory. This was especially prominent in the early church in Alexandria (see church history lesson 17 at www.Biblical-Literacy.com). In that time and place in church history, those who read the story as simple literal history were deemed to be placing a lower view on Scripture’s inspiration, for common people could write history! God would have written something much deeper, so it was reasoned.

The main advantage of taking the passages allegorically, is that there is then no problem with any consistency or scientific challenge. Once the road of allegory is chosen, anything goes! Of course, that is also the main disadvantage to taking it allegorically – anything goes! Can there be certainty of anything, unless somewhere Scripture gives us the allegorical interpretation? This view has not kept the prominence it once enjoyed in the early church, but it is not without adherents today. Even some who take a literal understanding at times see allegorical understandings of the texts. Much like Augustine, they question how the passages make sense unless the “light” created includes an idea of the spiritual insight God creates in an individual.

A related idea is to see the account, at least of Genesis 1:1-2:3 as a poetic expression of God’s theological message, rather than a recitation of science or history. Hence the pattern of the days as form and filling, the parallel structure of the writing, is seen as an indicator of an artistic painting, rather than a historical recording. Much like the Psalms that sometimes use poetry and picture to paint images, the passage in Genesis 1:1-2:3 is read for its message over its history.

- **Historical Context**

Another way of viewing the passage is in light of its historical context. This view seeks to understand the text first as written in the language and culture of the initial recipients. We know from Scripture that the Jews were cognizant of the culture around them. They often strayed into the idol worship of their neighbors, constantly fighting to return to worship of God (see 2 Kgs 11:18-28). Similarly, they sought a king because “all the nations” had one! (1 Sam. 8:5). We should expect that the Jews would be aware of the origins and creation stories of their neighbors. We have a number of those stories to read today, thanks, in part, to King Ashurbanipal!

In 630BC, Assyrian King Ashurbanipal (668-627BC) ruled in his hot, dry capital city of Nineveh. The king had a tremendous library with thousands of clay tablets, the “books” of his day. These tablets covered most every subject, from the mundane to the fanciful

(legal tablets, transactional tablets, *etc.*). Of course, the king died, his empire crumbled, and time overcame his library, burying the building and its contents. Then, in the mid to late 1800's, archaeologists discovered these tablets, and scholarship of the Old Testament has never been the same. They provide insight in a number of areas, including creation myths of Israel's neighbors.

Earlier in this study, I discussed two of those contemporary creation stories, which are found in the clay cuneiform tablets, called the *Atrahasis* and the *Enuma Elish*. In these stories, we read how the gods were created. The gods' first efforts are to fight chaos and bring order to the world. As the gods continue to multiply, they do all sorts of human things, though on a grander, more god-like scale. There are working gods who dig the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, piling up the dirt into mountains. There are warring gods, who fight against each other, hacking one dead goddess into two and hurling half of her body into the sky to form the dome of heaven.

In these stories of Israel's neighbors, the gods each have possession over the aspects of creation they either made or came to own. So the god who owns the storms has jurisdiction and control over the weather. The god who owns the sea is the sea. The god who has possession of a certain area of the earth can be both in that earth and also presiding over that part of earth.

In these stories, man is made to take burdens off the gods because the toil involved in the gods' hard work on earth starts to wear on them!

Radically, into a culture and community of this sort comes a creation story that is as opposite as possible. There is one God, not many. God is not made; he is the maker. God does not war against chaos in an effort to bring order; God creates the world in an orderly fashion, forming and filling in ways that are "very good." God does not simply make one aspect of creation to inhabit and rule over. God makes all of creation. He makes everything. God is not relegated to a certain piece of real estate; he presides over all there is. Creation is not a part of God, nor an aspect of his body. Creation is independent of God, something he spoke into being.

God did not grow weary of creating. He was not challenged in digging creeks and rivers or in building mountains. God made all with simple words. He rested not out of fatigue, but because his work was finished, and it was "very good"!

Man was not made to relieve God of burdens; man was made in God's image to enjoy his fellowship and company. God made man and gave to man! In the words of John Collins,

God made the material world as a place for mankind to live: to love, to work, to enjoy, and to worship God. The exalted tone of the passage allows the

reader to ponder this with a sense of awe, adoring the goodness, power, and creativity of the One who did all this.¹⁸

The historical context view sees the Genesis account as setting out the truth of God and his creation, not in the sense of science and history, but in the sense of story that teaches a competing truth to the stories surrounding the Jews.

Peter Enns has another way of expressing the historical context perspective. Enns expounded on a view set forth by Patterson Smyth in the late 1800's that Enns has termed the "incarnational analogy." Enns writes that just "as Christ is both God and human, so is the Bible."¹⁹ Enns then points out that Christ came into a culture using the language of the people, the manners of the people, the customs of the people, and was "made like his brothers in every way" (Heb. 2:17). So too, Enns sees the Bible:

Because Christianity is a historical religion, God's word reflects the various historical moments in which Scripture was written. God acted and spoke in history.²⁰

He sees the fact that the Bible was written in common tongue, the ordinary human language of the day, as substantiating his position. So Enns sees the Genesis texts as likely intended to contrast stories like the *Enuma Elish*. Enns does not believe the focus should be "history vs. myth" but rather "message vs. message."²¹

We should note that this section is not necessarily exclusive from other interpretive views. Many holding other views recognize that the proper starting place for understanding the passage is the message's meaning to its first audience. That said, Enns argues against a literal/scientific view believing it would be a misunderstanding to make Genesis a scientific view. In his mind,

It is wholly incomprehensible to think that thousands of years ago God would have felt constrained to speak in a way that would be meaningful only to Westerners several thousand years later. To do so borders on modern, western arrogance.²²

¹⁸ Collins at 78-79.

¹⁹ Enns, Peter, *Inspiration and Incarnation: Evangelicals and the Problem of the Old Testament*, (Baker Academic 2005) at 16.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, at 18.

²¹ *Ibid.*, at 53.

²² *Ibid.*, at 55.

Of course, contrary to Enns's belief, most who hold to a literal/scientific view would not agree that the message speaks only to those of the scientific era.

Wheaton University professor John Walton sets out the various worldviews, the cultural mores, and the competing belief systems of the ancient near east in an effort to give original sense to the Genesis stories. He notes that God is communicating in the stories, but,

Effective communication requires a body of agreed-upon words, terms, and ideas... For the speaker [God] this often requires accommodation to the audience. One uses words (representing ideas) that the audience will understand, thus, by definition, accommodating to the target audience... As interpreters, then, we must adapt to the language/culture matrix of the ancient world as we study the Old Testament.²³

Put in the context of creation, Walton asserts that comparative studies (comparing Genesis to other stories like the *Enuma Elish* or *Atrahasis*) are important for three reasons. First, it gives more data to help us understand the text. Second, it also helps us defend the authenticity of the text as it fits into its age in Scripture. Third, it gives us insight into the exegesis of the passage.

Walton notes that comparing the creation stories to the Babylonian and Assyrian myths gives a number of distinctions similar to what we give earlier in this section. Walton then goes further. He argues that the Jews had a similar view of the cosmos to those of other contemporary cultures. He explains a three-tiered cosmos with water locked in the heavens above the hard inverted shell that is the sky. Clouds cover the “windows” that open up in the sky allowing some of the heavenly waters to fall upon earth.” Mountains hold up the sky. The sky has the track for the sun, moon, and stars. Earth itself is a disc that sits on pillars above other waters. Underneath the waters and the earth is the underworld. Walton asserts that we read this worldview in the Genesis creation account as we read God speaking to the early Jews in their language and mindsets.

These many different approaches to Genesis immediately remove the issue of “faith versus evolution.” The fact that one does or does not believe in evolution does not impinge on the Biblical understanding of God. It might influence how one understands the passages, but it is not at odds with the passages.

This moves me to consider the writings of Paul.

What does Paul say about God and science?

The apostle Paul, a man trained in the top schools as a Jewish rabbi, accepted that Jesus Christ was the resurrected Lord after an encounter on the road from Jerusalem to

²³ Walton, John H., *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament: Introducing the Conceptual World of the Hebrew Bible* (Baker Academic 2006), at 19-20.

Damascus. Subsequently, he became a Christian missionary and apostle to the infant church. In his work, Paul wrote a number of letters setting out core tenets of faith and practice. Perhaps none is as well studied as his letter to the church at Rome. In that letter, Paul makes a most astonishing claim about God. In speaking of people who deny God and his truth, Paul wrote,

For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made (Rom. 1:19-20).

This is really an astonishing claim. Paul is claiming that God's "invisible attributes," especially his "divine nature" are "clearly perceived" in what we term "the natural world."²⁴

Paul made a claim about God and science that is worthy of inspection. Rather than conflict with science, this claim actually makes sense of the cosmos in ways that tie into the reality of life I experience day-by-day.

In a number of places, it is apparent what Paul thinks are God's "invisible attributes" and "divine nature." I briefly consider several of the more prominent ones:

- **God is a cause-and-effect God.**

I see this in a number of Paul's writings, including the immediate context of the Romans passage set out above. In the following Romans verses, Paul continued to write,

although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things. Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen (Rom. 1:22-25).

²⁴ The Greek is even a bit more precise in its meaning than we can easily convey in a word-by-word English translation. The "invisible attributes" that have been "clearly perceived" have a Greek verb in the "middle voice." This is not an English voicing of verbs, so it is a challenge for translating into English. In the middle voice, the noun related to the verb is participating to some degree in the action of the verb. The impact of it in a passage like Romans 1:19-20 is that the things that are made are actually participating in proclaiming the invisible attributes of God. It is written in a way that draws an emphasis to the actual testimony of the creation to the creator!

This is cause and effect in its most basic form. It is cause and effect on a human level (“although they knew... they did not honor... but became futile in their thoughts...”). It is also cause and effect on a divine level (“they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images... Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts...”).

We read this same thought of Paul tying the cause and effect of behavior to the character and nature of God in his letter to the Galatian churches.

Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life (Gal. 6:7-8).

The idea that you reap what you sow is simply another way to say, “Cause and Effect.” Paul uses it in reference to God’s nature by setting forth the premise that anything else would be a mockery of God.

Of course, when we consider science, we are deep into a world of cause and effect. Scientific laws include the idea that for every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction. We live in a cause-and-effect world from a scientific perspective, not a Harry Potter world of magic and unreliability.

- **2. God is a consistent and reliable God.**

I also see a consistent Biblical theme that God is “consistent” or unchanging. Hebrews 13:8 references Jesus as the “same yesterday and today and tomorrow.” The Old Testament, which served as Paul’s Scriptures, quoted God through the prophet Malachi as self-claiming, “For I the Lord do not change” (Mal. 3:6). The Psalms proclaimed that while the earth and nature will pass away, God is “the same” and his “years have no end” (Ps. 102:25-27).

Because God is consistent, God is reliable. Paul often uses the word “faithful” to describe this attribute or nature of God. To Timothy Paul wrote,

If we are faithless, he remains faithful – for he cannot deny himself (2 Tim. 2:13).

Similarly, Paul wrote to the church at Corinth describing God’s reliability to his followers explaining, “God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability” (1 Cor. 10:13).

Paul's understanding of the cosmos is that such reliability would also be found in the world around us. We should be able to observe this, and we do. The scientific method relies upon the reproducibility of experiments. All things being equal, a sequence of events should produce the same results each time.

- **3. God is a moral God.**

Paul ties the faithfulness and consistency of God to his actions in writing to Titus about the "hope of eternal life, which God, who never lies, promised" (Tit. 1:2). I have already discussed the difficulty of science providing a measuring rod for objective morality. Yet science does show that humans are moral creatures. Paul explained it using terms closely akin to our computer ideas of programming.

Paul wrote of those "Gentiles" who did not have the revelation of God in Scripture, yet were similar in their core understanding of right and wrong. He explained in Romans 2:14-15,

For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them.

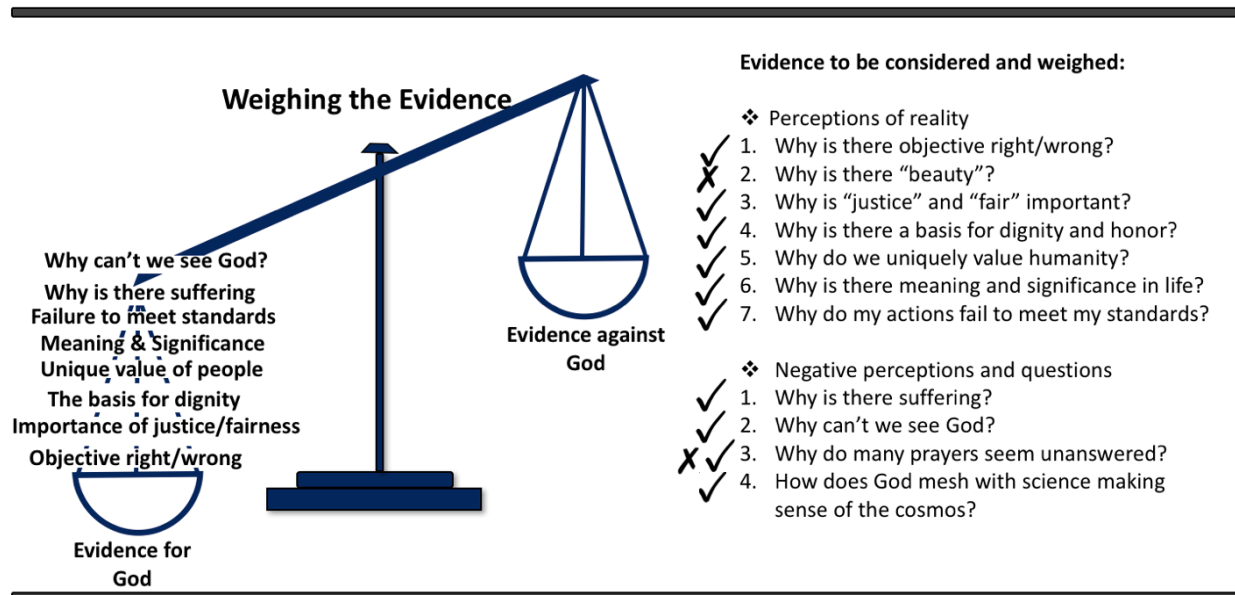
Paul's understanding of God and the cosmos is a plea to people to study nature, not run from it. Paul taught that as we understand it, then God is more easily understood (and is more reasonable). Paul says that what we today call "science" provides insight into God. Science is not against God, it is God's handwriting. It expresses aspects of God.

Paul never ascribed to the arbitrary gods of Greece or the gods of the elements of Mesopotamia (or even Norse myths), but the Israelite God over nature who created nature in ways that show his fingerprints. This invigorates me for scientific inquiry; it doesn't discourage it. As a cause-and-effect God, I don't simply say, "God did it." I look for the hows! It is not good enough to say, "I don't understand the brain, so – poof! God did it!" God would have a cause to what he did. There is a reason that the stars shine."

CONCLUSION

When I weigh the major arguments for God, and those against God, I repeatedly come back to the overwhelming evidence that God explains the reality of the world, of my existence, of my values, my short-comings, of those around me, and more. The view of the world without God, where I am merely a sack of chemicals collected from cosmic dust that briefly coalesced for the smallest speck of a moment in a remote part of the universe is not sensible. It doesn't work with reality. So with all this evidence in and weighed, I can't be an

agnostic. The greater weight of credible evidence speaks to me of the God and reality explained in the Bible.



POINTS FOR HOME

1. *"In the beginning, God..."* (Gen. 1:1).

God. Not man. Not matter. Not chance. God. John will echo this passage over a thousand years later writing, "In the beginning was the Word" (Jn 1:1). God is at the start, at the start of anything and everything. Take time this week to see things and contemplate the divine. Think about the One who is before all things and over all things. Is there any part of your life that should be without God?

2. *"And God said..."* (Gen. 1:3ff).

Over and over God speaks. Regardless of how you understand his revelation, he reveals himself as a God who speaks. When he speaks, it happens. Whatever he speaks exists. It is that simple. God is a communicating God who transforms with his words. God has spoken to you and to me. Ask yourself where he speaks and what he says. Write it down, chew on it, and pray about it. Do not think for a moment that God cannot speak into your life exactly what you need.

3. *"And it was good."* (Gen. 1:10ff).

All good gifts come from God. Ask yourself what good things are in your heart, in your life, in your family, in your past, present or anticipated in your future. Thank God for each of them. They are not accidents, nor are they of your creation. They are from God.