

In the beginning - Introductory notes

Before you start on these lessons, it may be best to think about who would be the best person to teach them. If you can, it might be best to get someone with a scientific background either to lead the discussion, or to come along to help. This is not because the approach of the lessons is scientific; in fact, one of the main points they make is that we should not expect the Bible to be a scientific document. But scientific questions may arise, and if you do not feel confident enough it could be helpful to find someone who at least understands what the words mean.

Please do not be daunted by this thought, however. We have tried to put everything scientific in the students' notes for them to read, so you should not have to feel that you have to 'teach' them the scientific aspects of the subject.

The aim of this group of lessons

We live in a society where evolution is accepted as a fact. Populist television presenters, pretending scientific credentials, offer simplistic accounts of the origins of life as though there were no unanswered questions, and make assertions of breathtaking arrogance with the calmness of one discussing the weather. Meanwhile, in schools and universities, students, teachers and researchers are pressured into following the accepted view, knowing that to oppose it would threaten their careers.

The temptation is to compete: to pretend that it is, in fact, we who know all the answers; that we, being better scientists than the scientists, are in fact the true source of information about how life began. It is good to remember that, just like Job and the television presenter, we were not there when the Almighty laid the foundations of the earth.

The main message of this introduction, therefore, is that unless you are a scientist you should not pretend to be one. It is best to stick to what you know; and what we know is good enough. God has given us his account of how he created the heaven, the earth, and all that is in them, and for most of us that should suffice.

So how can we help the young people we are teaching? There are five main points that these lessons seek to communicate:

1. The early chapters of Genesis are fundamental to everything else in the Bible. Their essential truth, therefore, must underpin everything else.
2. God's account of creation is not intended as a scientific treatise, as though he had to explain himself to some eminent and assorted group of 'ologists'.
3. The early chapters of Genesis set out:
 - to introduce us to a loving creator who has a purpose with his handiwork.

- to provide an account of creation that is comprehensible to anyone.
 - to set out the basis for family life and the relationship between husband and wife.
 - to explain the origins of sin and death, so laying a foundation for God's plan of salvation.
4. The theory of evolution does not on its own provide an adequate explanation of the incredibly complexity and beauty of the life that teems around us.
 5. Belief in creation is not stupid. Even setting aside all the other reasons for believing in the Bible, it is the most rational possible response to the world around us.

Is this enough? Will it help the young to cope with the pressure of school? It will not - cannot - be enough to answer every question and refute every cynic, but it should help to answer at least some of the doubts that young people experience, and to enable them to stand up for their faith at school.

Do not go beyond what is written

When the apostle Paul wrote this instruction to the church at Corinth (1 Corinthians 4:6), it was to warn them of a cause of division: the tendency of people to teach ideas not backed up by scripture, and in so doing to feed their own pride, not the church. We need to make sure that we do not make the same mistake.

This is not to discourage us from seeking to come to a better understanding of these things, nor to criticise those with genuine scientific knowledge who endeavour to explain their conclusions to the rest of us; these lessons could not have been constructed without their help. It does explain why in these notes we have not tried to piece together science and the scriptures, but have encouraged you to present a simple account of a God 'who made the earth, the air, the sky, the sea; who gave the light its birth'; who 'careth for me', and for all the rest of his creation.

Some interpretations of the Genesis account

There are two purposes for this section. The first is to point out that of the many different ways of understanding creation, none provides a complete explanation which resolves all doubts and problems; and none can be asserted as authoritative.

The second is to provide you with some material that may be helpful in discussion. It is not reproduced in the students' notes because they may find it hard to cope with the uncertainty it could create in their minds.

It may seem a rather negative section, but it is well to be aware of the pitfalls of some attempts to understand the account of creation. It is not intended in any way as a criticism of any of the authors concerned, or of any who follow their understanding.

The following ideas are considered below:

1. A young earth, made in 144 hours?
2. The flood explains everything?
3. A pre-Adamic creation?
4. Very long days?
5. Six statements made in 6 days 'in the beginning'?
6. A vision given to Moses?
7. Theistic Evolution?

In each case we will look at some scriptural and scientific considerations.

We hope that you will conclude that while it may be helpful to discuss some or all of these ideas with the young people, none of them provides an explanation which solves all difficulties. It is clear from the first lesson in this group that the early chapters of Genesis are about 'creation' in the broadest sense of the word; about God's plan for the earth and for mankind, and its ultimate perfection. We are encouraged simply to accept Genesis 1 as God's account of what he did, and not become preoccupied with reconciling it with science.

1. A young earth, made in 144 hours?

Archbishop Ussher calculated from the time periods given in scripture that the earth was made around 6000 years ago, and to many this is the understanding which is most faithful to scripture.

Scriptural considerations

A plain man, coming to the Bible for the first time, and with no preconceptions, would simply accept that the Almighty made everything in 6 literal days. He would conclude that Adam walked on a world that was 5 days old, looked up at a sun, moon and stars that had existed a mere 48 hours, and gave names to animals that had been formed on the previous day. The 3 day-old trees were already bearing fruit.

Scientific considerations

God is perfectly capable of forming the universe in 144 hours - he is Lord of heaven and earth. The scientific difficulty arises from the fact that the earth, and the universe which surrounds it, appear to be very old. What is puzzling is the apparent deception involved in forming a creation where light appeared to be travelling from stars which never emitted it; in making an earth which while very young had all the appearance of great age; and in manufacturing the fossil remains of plants and animals which never lived.

2. The flood explains everything?

This is not really a theory of creation, but is relevant to a discussion of whether or not the earth is much younger than it appears. In 1961 John C. Whitcomb and Henry M. Morris wrote 'The Genesis Flood'. Its main points are:

1. It sets out to prove that the flood was literally a world-wide event, not just one that affected all the inhabited areas of the earth.
2. It attempts to disprove the principle of uniformity, which underlies modern geology. This principle states that geological processes (sedimentation, volcanic eruptions, and so on) going on today are broadly similar to those which occurred long ago; it leads to the conclusion that different strata of rock are of different ages, and form a record of the development of life on earth.
3. It tries to demonstrate that the sedimentary rocks in the earth, of which there are vast quantities, with all the fossils in them, could only have been formed by a major catastrophe involving immense amounts of water swirling around the earth - in short, the Biblical flood.

The book argues well against many of the assumptions of evolutionists, and from that point of view is a useful one to read. It also has a respect for the word of God, and attempts to take it literally wherever possible.

Scriptural considerations

The book argues that the world after the flood bore no resemblance to the one before it; that the land masses were completely different, with continents and oceans where there were none before. It is hard however to reconcile this with what the Bible tells us of the earth before and after the flood. In the account of the rivers that flowed out of the garden of Eden we read of the Tigris and Euphrates, which exist with the same names today. The two other rivers flowed through the lands of Havilah and Cush, and the same regions still existed after the flood.

Again, the great majority of fossils are of aquatic creatures, especially corals and shellfish, whereas Genesis says that it was land-based creatures that died in the flood (Genesis 7:21-23).

Scientific considerations

While effectively demonstrating many of the weaknesses of the scientific support for evolution, the book does not adequately put anything in its place. To be true, for example, the theory would require that during the time of the flood (only one year) coral reefs were established and grew to enormous sizes; that there were major undersea volcanic eruptions without any sign of the lava coming into contact with water. Fossilised footprints of living animals would be difficult to explain during a flood that caused the death of all living creatures.

3. A pre-Adamic creation?

Brother John Thomas, in *Elpis Israel*, supported the idea that there had been another creation before that which is recorded in Genesis, and which was 'pre-existent for millions of ages before the Adamic era'. The fossils, according to this idea, are the remains of creatures which inhabited this earlier creation.

As part of this interpretation, the 'angels that sinned' in 2 Peter 2:4, are understood to be inhabitants of this pre-Adamic creation, and the intervening time period is covered in the time before God said 'let there be light'.

Scriptural considerations

This understanding of creation allows the events of Genesis 1 to fit into real 24-hour days without confronting the normal scientific view of the universe as almost infinitely vast and old. The phrase 'and God said' first occurs after the creation of the heaven and earth, and some see this as pointing to a passing of time, with the first day beginning only when God speaks. The Bible does not specifically mention an earlier creation, however, and there is no hint in Genesis of the catastrophe that would have wiped it out.

When introducing the sabbath law, God said to his people 'For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day' (Exodus 20:11). This would suggest that the formation of the earth and heavens were an integral part of the days of creation, not an earlier, and separate, event.

In the Authorised Version, the words of God to the newly formed mankind in Genesis 1:28 'Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth' support the view that the earth needed to be repopulated. This could be a good translation - God says the same to Noah after the flood (Genesis 9:1). The Hebrew word does not however mean 'replenish', but is simply the common word for 'fill' - which is the sense in which it is translated in Genesis 1:22 and nearly everywhere else in the Old Testament.

Scientific considerations

This interpretation of Genesis requires that a catastrophic event caused all life on earth to cease, and that the planet became 'mantled in impenetrable night'. Scientific evidence certainly supports the idea of past catastrophes, such as those that apparently wiped out dinosaurs, but there seem to be no traces of a global catastrophe which left the earth 'without form, and void'.

4. Very long days?

Many have attempted to resolve the apparent contradiction between the six days of creation recorded in Genesis and the appearance that the universe is very old. If it is the case that all creation was encompassed within six days, and if it is true that creation began many millions of years ago, it does not take much imagination to conceive that the six days may each represent very long periods of time. For partial parallels, see Hosea 6:2 and Luke 13:32.

Scriptural considerations

The Hebrew word for day does not necessarily represent a period of 24 hours. In Genesis 1:14, for example, the same word is used as the opposite of night, and in 2:4 the creation of Adam and Eve is 'in the day that the LORD God made the earth and the heavens'. Elsewhere in scripture it is used to refer to 'the day of the Lord' or 'in that day', meaning 'at that time'. The phrase 'the evening and the morning were the -th day' does seem to tie it more closely to a period of 24 hours, but it has to be said that Genesis does not precisely state the length of the days. This is supported by the fact that the sun (which gives our periods of 24 hours) was not made until the fourth day. Some have supposed that the sun had existed from the beginning but was shrouded in mist for three days; however, the scripture says that God made it on the fourth, not that he caused the mist to clear.

Scientific considerations

The main scientific difficulty with this idea is that it matches part of evolutionary theory (the age of the earth), but not, particularly, the rest. If we are seeking to match the sequence of Genesis

- a) Light
- b) Heaven
- c) Dry land, plants and trees
- d) Sun, moon and stars
- e) Sea creatures and birds
- f) Land animals and man

with geological time charts such as the one opposite, it could be done with a lot of simplification if one were to ignore the early development of life in the sea - but it is difficult to see what is being achieved.

| ERA | PERIOD | EPOCH | DATES (millions of years ago) | AGE of ... | EVENTS |
|-------------|---------------|-------------|--|---------------|----------------------------------|
| Cenozoic | Quaternary | Holocene | 0-2 | Mammals | Humans |
| | | Pleistocene | | | |
| | Tertiary | Pliocene | 2-5 | | |
| | | Miocene | 5-24 | | |
| | | Oligocene | 24-37 | | |
| | | Eocene | 37-58 | | |
| | | Palaeocene | 58-66 | | Extinction of dinosaurs |
| Mesozoic | Cretaceous | | 66-144 | Reptiles | Flowering plants |
| | Jurassic | | 144-208 | | 1st birds/mammals |
| | Triassic | | 208-245 | | First Dinosaurs |
| Palaeozoic | Permian | | 245-286 | Amphibians | End of trilobites |
| | Carboniferous | | 286-360 | | First reptiles |
| | | | | | Large primitive trees |
| | Devonian | | 360-408 | Fishes | First amphibians |
| | Silurian | | 408-438 | | First land plant fossils |
| | Ordovician | | 438-505 | Invertebrates | First Fish |
| Cambrian | | 505-570 | 1st shells, trilobites dominant | | |
| Precambrian | | | 570-2,500 | | 1st multi-celled organisms |
| | | | 2,500-3,800 | | 1st one-celled organisms |
| | | | 3,800-4,600 | | Approx age of oldest rocks 3,800 |

From MODERN PHYSICAL GEOLOGY, Graham Thompson Ph.D., Jonathan Turk Ph.D., Saunders College Publishing

A literal reading of Genesis, however, would lead us to the view that God made all trees on day 3, all birds on day 5, and so on; the evolutionary time chart assumes that many types of living thing are evolving simultaneously.

5. Six statements made in 6 days 'in the beginning'?

The idea is sometimes proposed that in the beginning God made, on successive days, six statements: 'Let there be light', 'Let there be a firmament ...' and so on. In the vast ages since that time he has worked out his plan and these statements have come true.

Scriptural considerations

Reading Genesis from this point of view would suggest that each section begins with a statement made 'in the beginning', follows on with a description of how over time this statement has been executed, and concludes with the Almighty's satisfaction at the completion of his plan.

Given the number of occasions on which God speaks of things he plans to do many years hence it is not hard to read the passage in this way. For example, 'for, behold, I create new heavens and a new earth: and the former shall not be remembered, nor come into mind' (Isaiah 65:17) can be seen as a parallel of one of the initial statements, still being worked out in God's purpose. Sometimes future events are actually spoken of in scripture in the past tense - Isaiah 53:4-9, for example; or Romans 4:17.

On the other hand, God says in Exodus 20:11 that everything was made (rather than begun) in six days.

Scientific considerations

This understanding allows creation to take a very long time. There is a scientific problem, though. In Genesis heaven and earth are already there 'in the beginning', before God spoke, and the normal scientific understanding or the origins of the universe would suggest that the sun and stars were formed before the earth. In Genesis, however, it is after the creation of the earth that God says 'let there be lights in the expanse of the sky'.

6. A vision given to Moses?

The idea is sometimes put forward that we have in Genesis 1 a series of visions, given to Moses on six successive days. This seems to resolve many difficulties, except that God tells us that he 'made' everything in 6 days, not 'told Moses'.

Another possibility is that Moses saw a vision of a creation which had been carried out in 6 days, and recorded what he saw. So Genesis 1 may describe a vision of the beginning, balancing the vision of the end recorded in Revelation.

Scriptural considerations

The difficulty with this idea is that it is not clear at what point the vision ends and the reality begins. The Lord Jesus and the apostles referred to Adam as an historical

being, and since the teaching of scripture about sin and death depends on there being one man and woman from whom we are all descended, this seems a basic point.

So we would be left with a vision in chapter 1, followed by a real description in chapter 2 of the creation of Adam and Eve.

Scientific considerations

If Genesis 1 is a vision then it has no direct relationship to any scientific theory.

7. Theistic evolution?

The idea is sometimes promoted that God used evolution as a tool in his creation of the universe.

Scriptural considerations

If the term is used to mean that life on earth did evolve as is popularly argued - and, in particular, if man evolved from an ape-like species - then the first men and women would have evolved from dying creatures and would, we assume, be dying themselves. It then becomes difficult to understand the Bible teaching about the fall and the sacrifice of the Lord Jesus.

If however 'theistic evolution' means that some changes in the forms of living creatures have occurred since creation, then few would argue. The process of natural selection is observed all around us as, for example, bacteria develop resistance to antibiotics, insects to insecticide and rats to poison. It does not however come close to explaining life on earth as we see it.

Scientific considerations

If evolution were demonstrated to be unquestionably true, we should be pushed into a reluctant acceptance of theistic evolution. While that is not the case, we do well to keep the idea at arms length.