

## *God, Sky & Land*

# Preface: The Disconnect Between Genesis and Science

### **The problem that confronts us.**

We wish it were otherwise, but there is no getting around the fact that there is a profound disconnect between science (as commonly understood) and Genesis (as usually read)—a disconnect that has existed for 400 years. This video series is about Genesis 1—or, more precisely, Genesis 1:1 to 2:4a, which is what we will always mean by “Genesis 1.”

A preponderance of scientific evidence indicates that the Earth is very old and that life upon it has been changing gradually for more than a billion years. On the other hand, the account in Genesis, combined with various genealogical indications in the Bible, has traditionally suggested to many readers that the Earth is only a few thousand years old and that all life forms came into existence during the same week in which the Earth itself was created. The gulf between these two viewpoints could hardly be larger, yet many theologians, joined by a large number of believing scientists, are convinced that there must be a way to harmonize them—for is not God the “ground of all being”?

Christians of a more conservative outlook have insisted that the issue will eventually be settled in favor of a literal understanding of the Genesis account. These Christians are convinced that while science may seem to point elsewhere at present, it often reverses itself and will eventually come around to a short chronology for both the Earth and life upon it.

Other Christians who are also practicing scientists disagree. For more than 300 years they have watched evidence accumulate that the earth is billions of years old, that the universe is even older, and that living things have long inhabited the Earth in ever-changing forms. Convinced by the weight of evidence from geology, paleontology, geochronology, genetics, etc., they have concluded that the Genesis story must be understood figuratively and nonliterally.

For many Christians, science is a weak reed, and inspired Scripture is the only reliable authority on the age of the earth and the origin of life upon it. For most scientists, however, the Genesis story is at odds with overwhelming empirical evidence and therefore must have some other purpose than a description of how and when the reality we encounter in the physical world came into existence.

Given that this Bible-versus-science controversy pits two disciplines against each other, and given that each discipline (not surprisingly) considers its own evidence conclusive, it is unlikely that the matter will be settled soon. Here we adopt neither of these familiar positions, nor do we offer an intermediate position such as a day-age interpretation, progressive creation, ruin-and-restoration, or theistic evolution. Instead, we proceed in a direction that is, in a manner of speaking, at right angles to the range of interpretations outlined above. Consequently the reader may benefit from some additional explanation by the authors.

### **The solution we propose.**

Our intention in writing *God, Sky and Land* and in presenting this video series is to come as close as we can to what the Hebrew audience understood when they read—or, more likely, heard—Genesis 1 for the first time. We are convinced that *what we hear now* is profoundly different from *what they heard then*, because their thought patterns differed from ours. Specifically, they had no category of *nature*, and without a concept of “nature’s laws,” science (primitive or modern) is impossible—a profound difference between their world and ours.

A major reason for this difference is that in the world of Genesis 1 the only active agents were either divine or they were human: everything that happened was the result of God acting or humans acting. If human action could reasonably be excluded—as in the case of earthquakes, tsunamis, and droughts—whatever happened was understood as a *direct result* of divine action. Our legal category—“acts of God”—were understood by them to be precisely that: *acts of God*.

Those who lived in the world of Genesis 1 were confident that God acted “routinely” to ensure that the rain would fall (“The LORD sends rain upon the earth,” 1 Kgs. 17:14), that married women would have babies (“When the LORD saw that Leah was hated he opened her womb,” Gen. 29:31), and that snow and ice would form and fall, (“To the snow [God] says, ‘Fall on the earth. . . . By the breath of God ice is given,” Job, 37:6, 10).

However, in addition to these ways in which God acted “routinely,” on rare occasions God was understood also to act “exceptionally”. God parted the sea for the Israelites escaping from Egypt (“At the blast of your nostrils the waters piled up, the floods stood up in a heap,” Ex. 15:8). God appeared on Mt. Sinai to give the law (“The appearance of the glory of the LORD was like devouring fire on the top of the mountain,” Ex. 24:17), and initiated the birth of Abraham’s son by a mother who was well beyond the age of childbearing (“I will give you a son by her,” Gen. 17:16). What they understood God to do routinely, we attribute to “nature”. We investigate it by *science* because we now have such a category; *the ancient Hebrews did not*.

That, however, is not all that needs to be said about the contrast between their world and ours. Given that only two kinds of agents were recognized, God was their “default explanation” whenever “man” was excluded. This is a profound difference. It thus made sense to the Hebrews to sometimes deliberately arrange matters so as to prevent “man” from influencing the outcome. In so doing they believed that they could access the mind of God the only other active agent in their world (“The lot is cast into the lap but the decision is the LORD’s alone,” Prov. 16:33).

In the Western world we now understand tsunamis, earthquakes, and droughts as events in the realm of “nature.” In addition to the personal agents “God” and “man,” we also conceive of impersonal agents such as “nature” and “chance” (or “randomness”), both of which we explore *scientifically*. When faced with an unusual physical phenomenon, our default explanation is no longer “God”; it is “nature,” “chance,” or sometimes both. We are certain that these two impersonal agencies are responsible for many of the things-that-happen. We do not now look upon the outcome of the roll of dice as a revelation of God’s will.



In the handouts that accompany the video presentations, we enlist the help of two cartoon characters, Moshe He’eb and Ian Michael O’Dern. The creation narrative was written for Moshe and the ancient Hebrew world he represents—a two agent world. I. M. O’Dern (“I am modern”) reads Genesis now in a world where the number of active agents is four, including nature and chance. Ignoring this, renders the Genesis account strange indeed.



Complicating the situation even further is the radical difference between Ian Michael’s obsession with *facts* (a relatively recent category of thought) and Moshe’s primary interest in what God was doing in the world and why he was doing it. Today we might call Moshe’s interest *theological* but it differed from our category of that name. For him, lacking a concept of nature, the category of theology included *what God did in the world* as well as its meaning—a category that no longer exists. To take an analogy from our own world, it is if the teams on the field are playing baseball and the audience interprets the events as if viewing a game of football. Our intention in the book and the video series is to explore the disconnect that inevitably arises under these circumstances, and to do so without devaluing Genesis 1 as a figurative, non-historical metaphor.