

Afterword: What Genesis Really Says

About Literal or Figurative Language

“Genesis 1 as the Ancient Hebrews Heard It” is the subtitle of the book *God, Sky and Land*. So, did Moshe hear Genesis 1 as a literal or as a figurative description of how physical reality came to be? It is the thesis of this book that he heard Genesis 1 as a straightforward account of the creation of his (Moshe’s) world.

Although we appear to have disposed of this query as if it were trivial, it is not nearly so easily dismissed. Many Christians in the past 400 years and several prominent theologians in the more distant past have read Genesis 1 as figurative or metaphorical. However, if Ian Michael opts for that approach now, he immediately faces a profoundly disturbing question: if the Bible’s opening chapter is figurative when it looks as though it was intended to be taken literally, where does this stop? Is there any Biblical passage that is to be taken at “face value?” Is all of it figurative?

To posit that Moshe understood it literally is, however, a quite different matter from Ian Michael expecting to read it literally and have it make sense in his 21st century world. Genesis 1 is not describing the coming-to-be of Ian Michael’s Planet Earth which Moshe did not know existed. It is not describing the origin of the solar system, the Milky Way Galaxy or the vast universe beyond. Moshe did not know anything of them either. It is describing, in language intended to be taken literally, the coming-to-be of the world Moshe lived in and knew about. That world was protected by a skyvault (*raqia*) and was poised precariously between the waters above and the waters beneath. That world differed radically from ours: the sun went around that world, for it was unmoving, fixed at the center of all creation. God had decreed it so. So, yes, Moshe heard and understood Genesis 1 literally.

About evolution: the history of life on earth

Genesis 1 is not about evolution. In the ten chapters making up this book “evolution” has not yet been mentioned. But perhaps it should be considered briefly here. There are three principal ways in which “evolution” occurs in conversations about “creation and evolution”.

- **Evolution-1** is the idea of long periods of time and major changes in the known forms of life on Earth. This idea involves “descent with modification,” but does not specify the means by which the modification occurs.
- **Evolution-2** includes Evolution-1 and adds the ideas of random genetic mutation and natural selection as major means of changes in life forms.
- **Evolution-3** includes both Evolution-1 and Evolution-2 and adds the idea that the process of evolution provides a completely adequate explanation for the existence of all known reality and the occurrence of all known phenomena. It follows that there is no reality corresponding to the word “God.”

Evolution-1 and Evolution-2 are scientific ideas, and since Moshe and his contemporaries did not have a conceptual category—an explanacept—corresponding to nature, natural regularity, or scientific law, Evolution-1 and Evolution-2 are irrelevant to Genesis 1. We need to consider them no further. Evolution-3, however, is an entirely different matter; it is a philosophical idea that is utterly incompatible with Genesis 1. The explanation given to Moshe is that all physical reality results from the freely chosen activity of a loving Creator—an explicit denial and dismissal of Evolution-3.

There is, however, more to be said on the matter. Labels are important. Few labels carry more baggage than “evolution,” in spite of the fact that the word is in common usage. When it refers to

Evolution-1 and Evolution-2, most scientists and scientifically-informed laypersons find it both useful and generally unobjectionable. Unfortunately, however, the word “evolution” commonly also includes Evolution-3, which generates major problems.

At this point the adjective “theistic” is often interjected to create the expression “theistic evolution,” intended to incorporate Evolution-1 and Evolution 2 while excluding Evolution-3. Unfortunately, however, for many people Evolution-3 is so thoroughly entwined with the word “evolution” that adding the word “theistic” often does nothing but constitute an apparent oxymoron. “God or evolution” is regarded as a necessary choice. We need a new term, one that carries none of the atheistic baggage of “evolution.” “Continuing creation” has been tried, but has not been widely adopted. “Teleological Descent with Modification” is accurate but probably too technical and unwieldy. Would “Teleological Development” work?

About God

If Genesis 1 is not “correct” about science—as we presently understand science—is it “correct” about God—as we presently understand God? Can a communication from Moshe’s time which fails our modern criterion of “scientifically correct” say anything relevant to us about Moshe’s God and ours? Here the answer is an unequivocal and enthusiastic “Yes!”

In Moshe’s world, who God was and what God did ordinarily (Moshe’s closest category to what we now call *nature*) were not separated. They were combined in the explanacept *God* because the only other explanatory category was *human*, and that was clearly inadequate in response to ultimate questions about the existence and meaning of *everything*, including humanity. The language in which an adequate understanding of the transcendent God is communicated is necessarily figurative, relying on metaphor and simile. Because what we think of as Nature (what God did “ordinarily”) was combined with what we think of as God, figurative language was necessarily used in Genesis 1 to express an understanding of both. There was no alternative.

This use of language, however, is not possible for us. We investigate the physical world by means of scientific experiment and describe it empirically, using the relatively recent explanacept of *nature*. The language in which scientific information is communicated is factual, sometimes mathematical, but inevitably empirical. Our knowledge of God, however, is still communicated as it was in Moshe’s time—in metaphor, simile, and symbol, using human analogies. How else could the Ultimate, Transcendent, and Ineffable be described?

The understanding of God thus communicated to Moshe remains relevant—indeed essential—to our understanding of God today. Scientifically, however, the One who created the sun, moon, and stars to light up the *land* has now become—for Ian Michael—the One who created ten sextillion suns and moons without number to light up a *universe*.

Does this mean that Ian Michael’s God is ten sextillion times greater than Moshe’s? The question is, of course, absurd, because all descriptions of God are, inevitably communicated by means of metaphor, simile, and symbol. The question would be reasonable only if it were *science* that was under discussion; but Genesis is about *God*, not science. The terms in which we now refer to God are the same as those in which Genesis 1 refers to God; they have not changed. But the terms in which we now refer to *nature* have changed radically. Failure to make this distinction is, we believe, responsible for the disconnect between science and religion that has plagued us for 400 years.