

TJW, HT, 18.11.07, Genesis chapters.1-2

Several times in the last year I've heard people who are not committed Christians explain to me why they don't believe - all with the same reason: "I can't believe", they say, "because I've got a scientific mind."

They're assuming that Christian faith and science are just in conflict.

You'll hear the same kind of thing in different words:

"Didn't Darwin and his theory of evolution disprove the Bible?"

A biologist from Oxford, Richard Dawkins, has become well-known for arguing that Darwinism has proved that God doesn't exist.

His last book, which I read, is called "The God Delusion." The title tells you what he thinks about God.

Where we're heading in this sermon is this: as Christians, being more confident about how to talk to someone who says: "science has disproved the Bible".

We're in the middle of a series of sermons on the beginning of the book of Genesis - the Bible's account of creation.

And today we're just pausing in the series, and looking at some of the questions about science and faith that everyone asks when they read Genesis.

Before we get into some of those details, let's remind ourselves of two great truths that God wants to teach us in Genesis chapters.1-3. When, in a minute, we get into science and evolution and so on, we mustn't lose sight of this.

First: we have a creator.

We did not get here by accident or chance.

We have been put here with meaning and purpose by a God who has meaning and purpose.

Every single human life has infinite value, because God made every single one.

When you want your life to have direction and meaning and value, that's a good thing, not an empty thing - because that's the way God made you to be.

And also: there is one true God.

We can't be certain when Genesis was written. But most likely it was written for the people of Israel when they were in the wilderness, just before God took them into the land he had promised to give them to live in.

And with Genesis he helped them to get ready. They were going into a land where the people worshipped all sorts of different gods - and some worshipped the sun and the moon and the stars as gods.

Our world is pretty similar - most people will say that they don't mind what you worship, as long as it makes you happy.

And Genesis says: don't worship the sun - that's just something God made. Don't worship anything that God made - only worship God. Whatever people around you may put at the centre of their lives - you keep the one true God at the centre of your life.

We have a creator - and he is the one true God. Don't lose your focus on these two great truths that God teaches in Genesis.

But now - what else might Genesis 1-3 be teaching?
How much does it teach about the areas which scientists deal with?

Let's look at two questions that trouble people here.

First, Adam & Eve: Were Adam and Eve real people?

The answer to that is a clear yes - God says that they were.

If you just read Genesis 1-3, you might not be certain about that.

But the rest of the Bible makes it clear.

For the best proof, turn on towards the back of the Bible - Romans 5.12 [READ verses.12-15].

God in his word here speaks of Adam as a historical figure in the same breath as he speaks of Moses - and even Jesus himself.

If Adam is just a myth or a symbol, then Romans 5 is meaningless.

You may well know that there have been massive advances in the science of human genetics in the last few years.

(In fact the head of the Human Genome Project, Francis Collins, is himself a committed Christian.)

And - at least at the moment - many geneticists think that human DNA points to the whole human race being descended from one original human couple.

There are still many questions, but at least here, for the time being, science and Genesis are not in conflict.

But of course Adam and Eve is a small issue compared to the biggie - the one that people usually have in mind when they ask: "Hasn't science disproved the Bible?".

And of course that's the question of creation and evolution.

A Christian has got to start by asking: what is God actually teaching in Genesis, and what is he not teaching?

Every husband knows how vital it is to be certain about what your wife is really saying, and what she's not saying, when she makes some remark to you.

How much more certain we need to be with God's Word - certain about what he is saying, and what he isn't saying.

So let's ask about Genesis chapters.1 & 2: what does God teach here about how long creation took - and about the order of the events in creation?

We've got to face up to the fact that different Christians who are all saved by the same Lord, and who all take the Bible equally seriously, disagree here.

Here are the three most common interpretations.

The first is this: “creation took exactly six days” - six 24-hour periods, and exactly in the order you’ll find in Genesis chapter 1.

Let’s go back to Genesis chapter 1.

You see there the progression of the days - the first day, God made light separate from darkness - and there was evening and morning.

The second day, God separated the sky and the water - verse 7 - and there was evening and morning, the second day.

Those who hold this view would say: this sounds like it’s meant to be a real progression of real days, doesn’t it?

This view is in deep conflict with most modern science. It says that evolution on a big scale did not happen. And it often argues that the earth is only a few thousand years old - and not four and a half billion years old, as most scientists think.

That’s the first view - it’s often called ‘creationist’.

The second view says: no, God is teaching that “creation took, not a week, but a long time - but he did do it in the order you find in Genesis.”

In this view the ‘days’ are long periods of time - maybe millions of years. And of course the word ‘day’ can sometimes refer to a long time - like when an older person says: “Well, back in my day...”.

People who think that Genesis teaches this, point to several bits of evidence for these days being symbolic . Let me give you just one - it’s in chapter 2.

Chapter two isn't a different account of creation. It focuses in on the sixth day, when God made man and woman, and tells us more about that.

And we find on that sixth day that God made Adam - put him in the garden to work it - gave him commandments - showed him all the birds and animals so that he could give them names - and then later made Eve as a companion for Adam.

Now you may feel that your days are packed - but it does seem that that's quite a lot for one 24-hour period.

God may well be showing us here in the Bible that these 'days' are meant to be symbolic.

So: creation as a week; creation as a long period, but in the literal order of Genesis 1.

But there's a third view of what God is teaching in Genesis.

And I'll come clean with you - this is the view I agree with.

I don't think that in Genesis God intends to teach us anything at all either about how long creation took, nor the order in which he did it.

So I think that the days are symbolic - and I think that the ordering of the days is symbolic, too.

Here are two pieces of evidence for that - look at 2.4 [READ 2.4-7].

Here mankind is created before the plants have grown - but in ch.1 the plants come first. The order in chapter 2 is just different.

Second bit of evidence: in chapter 1 God creates light on day one - and the sun on day four. It's not obvious where the light came from before the sun existed.

God is showing us here, right within the Bible, that both the days and the order of his acts of creation are to be taken symbolically. God is not intending to teach us anything about the time-scale and the processes of his creating work.

If that view is right, then the Bible does not in fact conflict with scientists who think that the universe is billions of years old, and that life developed gradually on earth over millions of years.

But the Bible always disagrees with those scientists who say that life on earth happened naturally, through the random process of natural selection as Darwin described it, without any need for God.

And there is still plenty of evidence around that life as we know it could simply never develop through random evolution, without there being the guiding hand of an intelligent Creator-God making it happen, step by step.

In discussions with people I think it's helpful to say this: Evolution is not the opposite of creation.

The opposite of creation is actually blind chance.

In Genesis, God forces you to ask yourself: what makes more sense - to believe that we with our reason, our love of beauty and justice, got here entirely by random chance, starting with a pile of impersonal chemicals that happened to form molecules and then proteins and then strings of proteins linking up into DNA, and so on. One scientist has said that life evolving that way by chance is no more likely than a tornado sweeping through a scrapyard managing to assemble a Boeing 747 out of the scrap as it blows it around.

Does it make more sense to believe that human life evolved that way - or to believe that we are the weird and wonderful people we are because God made us this way?

The key issues for a Christian reading Genesis are these: what is God really intending to teach us in Scripture? And can you be humble to people who take the Bible as seriously as you, who disagree with you?.

In a moment we'll pull all this together by seeing how to talk with people who say that science has disproved the Bible. But before we land there, let's just pause and say some important things about science and the Bible in general.

There is no final conflict between science and the Bible. They will in the end agree.

That's because God speaks both through his word in the Bible - and he speaks through the universe he made.

The better we understand the Bible, and the better our science, the more clearly we will hear the real voice of the one true God.

Christians need not be running scared of science.

So what do we do when there is a clash between what many scientists say, and what we think the Bible says?

Two things. We'll question the scientists: "You might be right - but how firm is your evidence really? Don't forget that over the centuries scientists have constantly changed their minds - and they'll do so again."

For example, there are many gaps in the Darwinian theory of evolution. Many parts of it may not as conclusive as we're often told they are.

But also, as Christians, when science and the Bible seem to clash, we'll go back to our Bibles and ask: "Have we really understood them properly? Or have we made them say something that they don't really say? Is God using truths that scientists are discovering about his world, to shed light for us on the meaning of his Word?"

That has happened in the past. Until the fifteenth century most people believed that the sun went round the earth - and most Christians thought that the Bible agreed. Then astronomers like Galileo proved scientifically that actually the earth went round the sun. And gradually Christians went back to their Bibles and saw that God doesn't teach about whether it's the sun or earth that's at the centre at all.

But this is a two-way street. The Bible also helps science. Most of the early scientists in Europe were committed believers. The book of Genesis told them that God had made a good and orderly world - a world that our human reason can study. Western science is based on what the Bible says about God and the world.

So in the end, what should a Christian say to someone who says: "I can't believe - I've got a scientific mind?"

What should I say this morning to anyone here who feels that way?

I'd start here. I'd say: "Science can't prove to you whether or not God exists - only God can prove it, if he exists. And he's done just that by coming into our world as a real historical person - Jesus Christ. He really lived, and you can investigate him historically and scientifically. Christian faith is not like believing in the tooth fairy. It's putting your trust in real events - Jesus' life, death and resurrection.

So I'm delighted that you've got a scientific mind. Why don't you use it to have a good look at the hard evidence about Jesus Christ - who said he was the creator, come to show himself to us?".

We do have a creator - the one true God.