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# Beyond Arithmetic: The Truth of Creation

by F. E. J. Harder

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“**I**n the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” If I should ask, “Do you believe that declaration to be true?” I suppose you would unanimously say yes. If I should then ask, “Do you believe that statement refers to the *ex nihilo* fiat creation of the entire universe in six literal days about 6,000 years ago?” I assume you would just as unanimously say no. If my suppositions are correct, we have all made some very basic accommodations relative to a literal reading of Genesis 1:1–2:3.

Throughout the Old Testament the phrase, “the heavens and the earth,” is used as the nearest Hebrew equivalent to our term, “universe.” The earth is that on which man stands. “Heaven” is all there is beyond the earth. Sometimes the expression is extended to “the heavens, the earth, and the sea” to include not only the sea on which ships sailed but also the primordial “deep” over which the Spirit of God hovered, moved, or strove in the act of creating.

Thou art the Lord, thou alone; thou hast made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them . . . (Nehemiah 9:6).

Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all their host. [After six days of creating (Genesis 2:1.)]

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. . . in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in *them* is . . . [The antecedents of “them” are heaven, earth, the sea (Exodus 20:11.)]

We must not overlook the fourth day of creation week which specifically describes the making by fiat of the sun, moon, and stars (Genesis 1:14–19).

Finally, if we diagram the literary structure of the creation narrative, it appears that Genesis 1:1 is a summary of what follows and that Genesis 2:1 is a summary of what has gone before. Of course, most of us want to separate in time the creation of the heavens and their hosts—the sun, moon, and stars (at least the stars) from creation week. Some would also subtract from the activity of creation week the stuff of the earth and the dark deep. However, we must recognize that we do so on other than biblical grounds and that we encounter difficulty in making our interpretations compatible with a literal reading of Genesis 1:1–2:3. There are those who hold that divine revelation of truth is indivisible. This view insists that theological truth is not revealed aside from the scientific or historical context within which it is embodied. This is what many mean by “plenary inspiration”—that there is no human element in the revelatory process.

Others hold that truth is divisible. According to this view, a Bible writer may reveal truth about God without having complete or accurate knowledge about science or history. In other words, an idea may be true theologically but not neces-

sarily true in every detail of expression. Ellen White was clear on this matter:

The Bible is written by inspired men, but it is not God's mode of thought and expression. It is that of humanity. God, as a writer, is not represented . . . God has not put Himself in words, in logic, in rhetoric, on trial in the Bible. The writers of the Bible were God's penmen, not His pen. (E.G. White, *Selected Messages*, Vol. 2, p. 21)

Poets and artists may give very effective portrayals of truth in symbols which do not stand up under close scrutiny. A minister may be a true representative of God and teach divine truth without himself being a scientist, historian, or even theologian. Did not Jesus teach theological truth within a vehicle which was false theologically? For example, there is the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19–31). The Psalmist uses the mythic imagery of the Babylonian epic in which Marduk creates heaven and earth by slaying Tiamat, goddess of chaos.

Thou didst divide the sea by thy might;  
Thou didst break the heads of the dragon on the waters.  
Thou didst crush the heads of Leviathan. . . .  
Thine is the day, thine also the night;  
Thou hast established the luminaries and the sun.  
Thou hast made summer and winter (Psalm  
74:13, 14, 16, 17).

Those who seek to destroy the value of Genesis 1 assume that truth must be total and indivisible. If this premise is accepted, the discussion of the creation narrative must remain in the realm of science. It is not good apologetics to admit the premise of the attacker without critically questioning it. If this premise is not agreed to—if theology and science are not necessarily bound together—then Genesis 1 can be discussed as a theological statement.

The Bible student should not be satisfied with any explanation which makes the Scriptural record even apparently dependent upon the changing views or findings of science. For careful thinkers, using science, history, or philosophy as bases for Christian faith is becoming increasingly less effective. Such an approach allies the Christian faith with the destiny of human theory. When Christianity is tied to any particular world

view, it stands or falls with a human concept. In rapidly changing times such as ours this means that Christianity is liable to rejection before it has had a hearing.

**T**he doctrine of creation does not stand by itself but depends upon and elaborates the redemptive activity of God in history. What makes it so ultimately vital is that fundamentally it is Christological and eschatological.

The beginning:

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth (Genesis 1:1).

The end:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away. . . .

And he who sat on the throne said, "Behold, I make all things new. . . . I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end (Revelation 21:1–4, 14, 12).

Between the beginning and the end stands the central affirmation of the Christian faith:

In the beginning was the Word,  
and the Word was with God,  
and the Word was God.

All things were made through him,  
and without him was not anything made that was  
made. . . .

In him was life, and the life was the light of men. . . .  
The true light that enlightens every man was coming  
into the world. . . .

And the word became flesh and dwelt among us full  
of grace and truth. . . .

To all who received him, who believed in his name,  
he gave power to become children of God. . . . (John  
1:1–4, 14, 12).

The opening imperative of the three angels' messages proclaims the judgment of the eschaton in the context of the original creation:

Fear God and give glory to him, for the hour of his  
judgment has come;

And worship him who made heaven and earth, the sea  
and the fountains of water (Revelation 14:7).

From the beginning of the world to its end, the continuing providence and sustain-

ing activity of God in Christ are proclaimed by the doctrine of creation:

He (Christ) is the image of the invisible God . . . for in him all things were created in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible. . . .

All things were created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together (Colossians 1:15-17).

**S**ymbolizing this entire process is the divinely ordained Sabbath. In the beginning:

Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them. . . .

So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all his work which he had done in creation (Genesis 2:1,3).

At the end:

. . . as the new heavens and the new earth which I make shall remain before me, says the Lord . . .

From new moon to new moon, and from Sabbath to Sabbath, all flesh shall come to worship before me, says the Lord (Isaiah 66:22, 23).

Between the beginning and the end:

You shall keep my sabbaths, for this is a sign between me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I, the Lord, sanctify you. You shall keep the Sabbath, because it is holy for you. . . . (Exodus 31:13-15).

I keep the Sabbath as a memorial of creation and of the Creator's becoming one with his created beings. I keep the Sabbath as a witness to my faith in the Creator's sanctifying activity in creating a new heart within me. I keep the Sabbath as a foreshadowing of Sabbaths to be celebrated when the heavens and the earth will be created anew.

I do not keep the Sabbath because of the thousands of years I may think have passed since it was instituted. I believe in a seven-day creation week—irrespective of where such a week may fit into the astronomers' light-year scheme, or into the geologists' fossil strata. Yes, I believe in a literal creation week, but that is not why I keep the Sabbath.

I keep the Sabbath because God blessed and hallowed it. I keep the Sabbath because God imbedded within his eternal law an unequivocal command to do so. I keep the

Sabbath because the Son of God declared himself to be Lord of the Sabbath and because Jesus of Nazareth reaffirmed the holiness with which he had invested it as the Creator. I keep the Sabbath because I look forward to entering God's rest as described in the fourth chapter of Hebrews:

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 enters God's rest also ceases from his labors as God did from his (Hebrews 4:4, 9, 10).

I repeat again, I believe in a seven-day creation week, although my concept is flexible respecting what may have been included in it. This is a faith statement for which I neither seek nor expect scientific confirmation, and for which I know of no scientific disproof. However, if it were ever undeniably demonstrated to be untenable, I can't conceive of any possible change that it would make in my theology or religious practices. Even if I admit that the world was not created in six days, I would still keep the seventh-day Sabbath.

**I**f Christianity is not dependent upon contemporary scientific discovery, it follows as a corollary that the value, authenticity, or authority of a divinely inspired messenger must not be made dependent upon his or her inerrancy in science.

A prophet is one who sees things that do not lie in the domain of natural sight and hears things which human ears don't ordinarily hear. If he or she speaks in the realm of the ordinary, the contribution of inspiration lies not in a repetition of that which can be known by natural means, but rather in an apprehension of its spiritual significance, or of its providential nature, or of its place in the divine plan, or of how God's will is thereby fulfilled or revealed. The problem of distinguishing human error from divine truth raises the basic question: how do we distinguish any truth from error? How can we know anything for sure?

A first principle is a proposition that

conforms to related evidence, is coherent, and is consistent with the operation of rational processes. This can be a complicated achievement, even respecting mundane questions. It becomes even more complex when applied to pronouncements on matters outside the realm of ordinary sense perception. There are no simple, definitive answers to our problem, but we have been given some helpful guidelines.

If you say in your heart, how may we know the word which the Lord has not spoken?—when a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord, if the word does not come to pass or come true, that is a word which the Lord has not spoken . . . (Deuteronomy 18:21, 22).

This is an application of the principle of coherence. When a prophet speaks about matters that can be tested by natural means of discovery, what he says is subject to such test. If there is no coherence between validated fact and the message, then that message was not from God, irrespective of how truly this prophet may have spoken for God in the past, or how fully he may represent him in the future.

This principle is illustrated in I Kings 13. In obedience to a divine command, a prophet went from Judah to rebuke the heresy of Jeroboam. Also in obedience to his instructions, he declined the invitation of the king to have dinner with him and began his return journey immediately after delivering his message and seeing it confirmed before Jeroboam by several miracles. Upon being overtaken by an older prophet he again obediently refused his invitation to supper. To this the old prophet said:

I too am a prophet as you are. And an angel said to me by the word of the Lord: Bring him back with you to your house so that he may eat bread and drink water (I Kings 13:18).

The record says that he lied. But the younger man deferred to seniority and did that which he had refused to do even at the request of the king. That evening at the table:

The word of the Lord came to the prophet (the lying prophet!) . . . and he cried to the man of God who

came from Judah: Thus says the Lord, Because you have disobeyed the word of the Lord . . . your body shall not come to the tomb of your fathers . . . And as he went away a lion met him and killed him (I Kings 13:21, 22, 24).

The fact that one message of the old prophet was in error—even a deliberate lie—did not mean that the Lord never spoke by him. The very next time he claimed to be speaking for God he actually was, and his message was quickly verified.

This example raises another question: how does one validate a prophet-given message not subject to ordinary criteria of evidence? The first declaration of the lying prophet was of this kind—“An angel said to me . . . bring him back . . .” How could this be tested? It could be tested simply by another application of the principle of coherence—that is, coherence with previously confirmed revelation. The Judean prophet had seen ample assurance that his commission to Bethel was of divine origin. The representation made by the old prophet did not cohere: it was inconsistent and contradictory. It was a word that the Lord had not spoken.

Representative of various scriptural confirmations of this principle are:

Don't listen to a prophet who asks you to follow gods you have not known, even though he works miracles to substantiate his mission (Deuteronomy 13:1-3).

The well-known “To the law and to the testimony” test (Isaiah 8:20).

Paul brands those who forbid practices which God has previously approved as “deceiving spirits . . . taught by demons . . . hypocritical liars” (I Timothy 4:1-3).

Even though we recognize that all human apprehensions of truth are partial and may appear contradictory at first sight, a careful study of all related factors should reveal a basic harmony in spite of illusions with respect to some details.

If, while standing at the edge of a pond, I thrust a stick halfway into the water, my eyes will tell me that the stick is bent. When I retrieve it, I will see that it is straight again. So I formulate the proposition: putting a stick part-way into water bends it and

returning it to the air straightens it. The trouble with that is that I didn't use all the available evidence. If I put the stick back into the water and slide my hand along its entire length, my sense of touch tells me that it hasn't been bent at all. Now the evidence of my two senses is inconsistent—there is no coherence. Not until I get more evidence with respect to the nature of light and learn that it is refracted when passing from thin to dense matter, for instance, from air to water, will I by a rational process achieve harmony of the data and arrive at truth.

It is the coherence principle that gives us trouble with Genesis 1. How can the concept of a seven-day creation week be harmonized with the apparent evidences respecting origins found in the natural world? (Of course, there is even a problem of the creation account in Genesis 1 being consistent with Genesis 2 where the creation of man is placed *before* the creation of vegetation instead of three days later.) To find harmony between the biblical and natural data will require continuing intensive study of all relevant factors in both—I repeat, *both*—sources. Too much of the time we have assumed that we totally understand the Scriptural materials and that it is up to our scientists to make the data from nature fit the Procrustian biblical bed we have so uncritically inherited, and in which we seem to be so comfortable.

I suggest that creation is a fundamental, vital doctrine, a religious affirmation about the sovereignty of God, his redemptive activity, and the absolute dependence of his creatures. As such, it merits the broadest and deepest investigation by theologians concerned with proclaiming the everlasting gospel. To the extent that the doctrine relates to discoveries in the natural world, it requires cooperative studies between theologians and scientists, both respecting the others' dedicated scholarship and neither trying to usurp the role of the other.

For such ongoing research and dialogue to be fruitful requires mutual respect, humility—another name for teachability—and

the ability to exercise patience. There should be careful model-building and theory development. These are philosophical endeavors and must be subjected to philosophical challenge, criticism, review, and revision. Of course, the attacks should always be directed at the philosophy and not at the philosopher, and the philosopher should not identify himself so inseparably with his philosophy that this becomes impossible!

The doctrine of creation and the flood narrative are not primarily concerned with genetics, species variation, fossil deposits, or the geologic column. They are above all a revelation of God, the nature of humanity, and God's redemptive activity. Nearly one-third of Genesis 1 and more than half of the creation record of Genesis 2 are devoted to the creation of humanity. All of the third chapter deals with humanity's failure and God's continuing concern for humanity, which sets the theme for the rest of the Bible.

**F**or a few moments let us go back in our imagination to that day when the God of heaven skillfully fashioned the clay of Eden into the intricate design of a human body. As we watch, the Creator pauses, apparently viewing his handiwork. Actually he is looking beyond at the consequences that would follow. Is he counting the cost?

He sees the day this man will hide from him in fear, and because of His rebellion will have to be evicted from the Edenic home. He views the stained feet of Cain on ground wet with the blood of his brother. He hears the filthy clamor emanating from the thoughts of mankind so degenerate that every imagination is only evil continually, followed by the horrible spectre of the flood. He looks far beyond to a night when he himself will lie in a stinking Bethlehem barn, a helpless offspring of and fully identified with the descendants of this inert form before him. He anticipates the pain of another night when he will sweat blood in

agony and be betrayed by the kiss of a friend. He feels the thrust of nails being driven by men whom he had come to save through the hands that have just formed their first father.

Then, momentarily, he recoils—not from the suffering but from that dark abyss that could signify eternal separation from his heavenly Father. Is this lump of clay worth that? But then the troubled brow is replaced by a majestic smile as the Creator of heaven and earth stoops, and in tender love embraces that cold form of clay and bestows the kiss of life, transmuting it into a creature of whom the Psalmist would sing:

Thou has made him little less than God,  
and dost crown him with glory and honor  
Thou has given him dominion over the works of  
thy hands;  
Thou hast put all things under his feet (Psalm 8:5, 6).

That is at the heart of the doctrine of the first creation. The significance of the second

creation is like unto it, for it is not primarily concerned with peaceful wolves, tame lions, harmless snakes, luscious vineyards, pearly gates, and golden streets. Rather, the new creation fulfills the design for the first creation, culminating in universal recognition of God's sovereignty, the acknowledgment of the triumph of man through the grace of the Word made flesh, and a celebration of the ultimate union of creature with Creator.

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth . . .

I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,  
"Behold the dwelling of God is with men.

He will dwell with them,  
and they shall be his people,  
and God himself will be with them . . .

And he who sat upon the throne said,  
"Behold I make all things new. . . .

He who conquers shall have this heritage,  
and I will be his God  
and he shall be my son" (Revelation 21:1-7).

## Statement of Affirmation

We, the participants of the 1983 Geoscience Field Conference, affirm our belief

1. In the validity of the scriptural record as an authentic and historical description of the origin of our world. We rejoice in the creative power of God, and with the psalmist declare, "The Lord, he is God: it is he that hath made us, and not we ourselves; we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture" (Psalm 100:3).

2. That the biblical record requires a short chronology of approximately 6,000 years in contrast to tens of thousands or millions of years.

3. That the Old Testament narrative of a global flood is supported in the New Testament by our Lord, who compared earth's final destruction to that of Noah's day. It is spoken of also by the apostle Peter, who reminds us of "the longsuffering of God [who] waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was preparing, wherein few, that is, eight souls were saved by water" (Matt. 24:37-39; I Peter 3:20).

4. In the importance of honoring the seventh-day Sabbath as a memorial of a literal Creation week in accord with God's Ten Commandments, the Sabbath being a vital element of God's last appeal to the world, calling every nation, kindred, tongue, and people, to "worship him that made heaven, and earth, and the sea, and the fountains of waters" (Rev. 14:7).

5. That secular, humanistic theories such as the evolutionary model or those theories intermediate between Creation and evolution that extend the creation

process into a long, indefinite period have no place in the belief system of our church. (See 2 Peter 3:3-6.)

6. That there is fundamental agreement between God's book of nature and the revealed Word when they are correctly interpreted.

7. That the creationist/catastrophic model best explains that information derived from revelation and science. At the same time we recognize that limits of understanding and a personal belief system characterize all approaches to interpreting data touching on the earth's past. We further believe in the value of scientific study as a method of approaching natural phenomena, a premise that underlies denominational sponsorship of the Geoscience Research Institute.

### Participants

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