

Understanding Genesis 1 through a Mythic Scientific Cosmogony



Christian views of the Bible that try either to accommodate the text of the Genesis creation story to the current stage of scientific knowledge, or at least to maintain its truth alongside that knowledge, are apt to use terms like “mythological”, “allegorical”, “figurative” or “poetic”. These terms actually have quite distinct meanings, but in popular discussion tend to be used as synonyms, often to soften negative impressions given by one or the other. Despite these efforts at amelioration, however, all these words tend to be taken by unbelievers to mean “fiction”, and by many believers to mean “attempts to dismiss as fiction.”

It has to be said that in some cases the terms are actually used with this implication. Depending on how loosely those who use them sit to the idea of Scripture as inspired by God, the subtext may be that hidden amongst a primitive pre-scientific worldview a few spiritual truths may lurk, or that indeed we cannot expect to find any significant insights in the face of such a primitive cosmogony.

The better educated theologian will try, often in vain, to explain that the ancient writers had different concerns to their modern readers, so that they were less interested in scientific categories of truth and happy to couch their teaching in terms familiar to their original audience.

All these issues are predicated on the idea that our culture, and certainly that aspect of it called “science”, has little place for the expression of truth in mythic, or figurative, terms. But this is not, in fact, the case. We are no less in need of such modes of

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expression than our forbears, only we tend to describe them as “models” or “thought experiments” rather than as myths or allegories.

Nobody seriously believes that Schrödinger actually had a cat that was simultaneously alive and dead because of a quantum paradox, nor even that such a thing is actually possible. But the story is still regarded as expressing scientific truth. Nevertheless it is truth expressed mythically. Thomson’s wonderfully-named plum-pudding hypothesis was disproved early in the twentieth century, but not because scientists were sceptical about the existence of plum-puddings in atoms. The hypothesis was always accorded a figurative meaning.

Apropos of the more immediately relevant question of the earth’s origins, I came across the illustration at the head of this piece in an article on the *Biologos* (theistic evolution) website. It was used simply as a header, and indeed is an unremarkable example of the kind of epochal chronology of the earth common in every textbook of evolution. But we may not immediately recognise that in order to emphasis just two central truths (the great antiquity of the earth and the succession of species over time) it has distorted its representation of the earth out of all recognition.

A good way to illustrate this is by trying to view it through the eyes of another, non-evolutionary, culture – but one close enough for us to understand. Imagine (as a thought-experiment!) that some 17th century adventurer had found this picture painted on an animal hide in a temple in Central America, and brought it back to be studied at Oxford University. The heiroglyphs would, of course, be indecipherable. But the realistic depiction of animals, plants and landscape floating in a blue void would make it pretty clear that this was some kind of representation of the world.

But what an alien worldview is presented here! The painter clearly pictures his own territory as a narrow strip of land where his people and their tall buildings are set. On one side it is bounded by an ocean or river which flows over into a limitless abyss that also borders the land on two sides. Across this water is another land peopled by some apparently savage natives, but further afield the artist clearly imagines increasingly bizarre and fabulous beasts – presumably because he has only heard of them in tall tales by travellers. His culture is so parochial that he is ignorant of any human habitation in the wider world. Most bizzare of all, he pictures the earth as a spiral ribbon of water contained by strips of land that seems to sink towards some infinitely deep whirlpool in the heavens. However, the lack of any heavenly bodies in the ether shows his culture to be entirely geocentric.

Perhaps this interpretation of the image is extreme, but it does serve to illustrate how, even in the representation of purely physical reality, scientists find it beneficial to suppress or distort most of the familiar features of the world in order to show what is, in this setting, most important. It is certainly easy for us to understand what is actually meant. I remember a similar illustration in a book I had as a six-year old, which I had no trouble interpreting even at that age. But this apparent clarity is misleading – it presupposes not only an in-depth knowledge of the natural world (if only to flag up for us that this spiral world is not a simple representation of our globe), but cultural familiarity with a whole range of graphical conventions such as time represented in linear form, maps with written legends, representative creatures and landmarks drawn out of scale whilst the timeline is scalar, and even the concept of progress represented

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as a spiral staircase going upwards. All these are purely cultural associations, which someone from a distant society would miss or misinterpret.

Conversely, we ourselves inevitably misinterpret the equivalent conventions of other cultures. For example, very few of us could see a medieval *mappa mundi* for the first time, with Jerusalem at the centre and clearly distorted positions and sizes for the other places, and not attribute monumental ignorance and imprecision to the ancient cartographers. Indeed, we would probably regard such a map as being erroneous to the point of uselessness, or else pure fiction.

But such maps were not, in actuality, designed to get the traveller from A to B at all. They were, just like our spiral earth representation, intended instead to show important truths about the world, according to the medieval worldview. In this worldview, the basis of creation and society was the hierarchy God has created, in which he rules over the angels, the angels over the heavenly bodies, and the heavenly bodies over men (hence the prevalence of astrology). In the world of men, God also appoints kings and rulers, with the various classes finding their places in the hierarchy. This, of course, is the reason that Jerusalem, where God reigns through his crucified Son, is at the centre of the map – a much more valid reason, incidentally, than that for placing Europe at the centre of world maps in British atlases.

Though such a scheme seems alien to us, and is not without its faults, Christians should note that it basically represents what we say we believe – that the risen Jesus reigns over the world, that he has sovereignty over the rulers and nations and that each of us has a place in his plan. The fact that we find ourselves more at home with the Spiral-world, even if we may be Young Earth Creationists who abhor its worldview, shows how much we are, nevertheless, children of the scientific age.

I believe that, with the two images of Spiral-world and the medieval *mappa mundi* placed together in our minds, we are in a better position to see the kind of thing that is going on in Genesis 1. The ancients, of course, had not invented the diagram and we only have written records from them. Just imagine how hard it would be for us to create a verbal equivalent of the Spiral-World diagram. A face-value description of the diagram would, like my hypothetical 17th century interpretation above, create the impression of a science-fiction fantasy like Larry Niven's *Ringworld*. Along the way we would undoubtedly lose the actual point of the illustration, the process of evolution over vast epochs of time.

But that is because our mental symbolism, finely tuned to make sense of modern metaphor in graphic representations, has not been educated to do so in the literary realm. The writer of Genesis was working within a verbal symbolism every bit as sophisticated as the graphic symbolism we use to understand Spiral-world, and that which the medieval world used to interpret *mappae mundi*. The question is not whether he was writing truth or some kind of falsehood, but what kind of truth he was emphasising and what, in literary terms, was diagrammatic convention.

Both Spiral-world and *mappa mundi*, it must be stressed, are making truthful representations of the real world: the former, chronological truth and the latter spiritual truth. Both are sacrificing other truths for the sake of clarity, just as we sacrifice the truth about the roundness of the world every time we use a paper map.

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The symbolic milieu of Spiral-world is so familiar that we consider it an accurate representation of the world as soon as we look at it. That of the medieval world is alien to us until scholars show it to us. That of the Ancient Near East is so distant in time from us that even scholars can only begin to reconstruct that world, using knowledge from the excavated literature of the surrounding cultures. They can begin to help us understand what the ancient author meant us to understand, and what we ought not to take at face value.

But this presents a clear problem to those who, as I do, believe that Scripture was written by men “carried along by the Spirit” in order to make us “wise for salvation”. Why would God cause his word to be written in terms that we cannot understand? Did he not expect that we should take the Bible literally?

At one level, the answer is that every one of us copes with this difficulty every time we open the Bible. Our understanding of “I am the Good Shepherd” is deficient until somebody tells us that in those days shepherds didn’t drive their sheep, but led them. The fact that we learned that fact from Sunday School pictures doesn’t alter the fact that somebody once had to do some research. Similarly a whole movement has grown up around the need to understand the Hebraic roots of Christianity, which are gleaned from all kinds of non-Biblical sources from the Dead Sea Scrolls to modern Orthodox Judaism (rightly or wrongly!).

At another level God’s wisdom is such that our limited understanding does nothing to prevent his word doing its proper work in our lives. Everyone accepts today that the Bible passages used in the 16th century to dismiss Copernican astronomy should be taken figuratively. The Flat Earth Society, originally formed by Biblical literalists, was finally buried by the Apollo Programme. But before the Copernican revolution, when the whole world – and certainly the whole Church – believed the earth to be physically at the centre of the cosmos, nobody’s salvation was put in danger by the belief. As scientific progress occurred, so progress was both necessary, and evident, in Biblical interpretation. Even when Luther and the Pope were agreed on contradicting Galileo, their misinterpretation of Scripture on this point had no bearing on what they believed about the Gospel.

Provided it is taken seriously, but whatever ones interpretation in detail, Genesis 1 clearly teaches (amongst other key truths) the creation of the world by a good and rational God, the dignified position of humankind (of both genders) and the concept of resting under God’s rule as the culmination of creation. Moving on to the following chapters, any reverent interpretation will show the seriousness and universality of sin as the key problem in the world, the reality of God’s wrath and his intention that mercy should triumph over judgement. In the pre-enlightenment age, assuming a face-value (in European terms) six-day creation made no difference to those saving truths even if it missed the subtlety of the author’s intentions. The range of historic interpretations, from the allegorical in Patristic times to the YEC, OEC, TE or BL options of today, can all lead us to Christ. Only the dismissal of Genesis as “fiction” is likely to lead us elsewhere.

Nevertheless, there are real problems from maintaining an ill-informed interpretation of Genesis, or the other Scriptures come to that. In the days when Copernican astronomy was becoming scientifically incontrovertable, battles between theologians

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like Luther and the natural philosophers led only to doubt about the reliability of the Bible, with serious consequences for “weaker brethren” or those in the scientific community who began to feel they had to choose between religion and evidence. Although all branches of the Church rapidly accommodated their understanding of Scripture to the new science, it is arguably true that three centuries later we are still paying the price for the disturbance in the artificial divide between faith and science.

The same is true today. I was raised in the relatively easy-going (with regard to evolution) atmosphere of British Evangelicalism, and the issue has still given me some of my most serious doubts over the last half century. It is easy to imagine children disciplined in the YEC orthodoxy of parts of the US, torn between cultural conformity and intellectual conviction, eventually settling on unbelief as the only way to maintain integrity. This ought not to be the case.

So how we read our diagrams matters. Spiral-world represents the real world, but not exhaustively, not without mythic and figurative imagery, and not in the way that most of us perceive it day by day. Genesis does the same, but if as many of us believe it is the word of God the stakes are much higher when we fail to work towards a better understanding.

[The Hump of the Camel](#)