
THE DOCTRINE OF CREATION

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

The Bible begins with the story of creation, declares at the outset that God is the Creator, and reiterates this understanding of origins from Genesis to Revelation. The Bible’s teachings on creation clearly are foundational to Christian faith.

In studying the biblical doctrine of creation, it should be understood that the Bible makes no claim to be a scientific textbook. Nor should the Bible, which is intended to communicate to people throughout the ages, be expected to utilize modern scientific terminology. Nonetheless, the Bible declares itself to be trustworthy in whatever it teaches to be true, whether relating to matters of faith, history, or the created order. “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness” (2 Timothy 3:16). We affirm with Jesus the authority, certainty, and finality of God’s eternal Word, for “Scripture cannot be broken” (John 10:35, NASB;² Matthew 5:18).

God Is Creator of Everything

In the Genesis creation narratives, and throughout the Old and New Testaments, the Bible emphasizes that God is Creator, not only of the earth and its inhabitants, but of everything that exists (Exodus 20:11; Nehemiah 9:6; Psalm 146:6; Acts 14:17; Revelation 4:11; 10:6).

The Bible story stands in sharp contrast to ancient Near East thought that tended to be dualistic, teaching that the universe in some form existed eternally alongside the gods. In ancient mythologies, the gods created certain things but always from preexisting materials. However, the biblical declaration that God is the Creator of everything sets Him apart from these pagan gods and their idols (Psalm 96:5).

More recent materialists also tend to believe that matter is eternal and the sum total of all existence. Consequently, evolutionary theory assumes that the universe and all life forms, including humans, are evolving spontaneously through mechanistic forces, unguided by any external intelligence, divine or otherwise.

Over against these beliefs, the Bible assumes and plainly teaches that God existed before all things (Psalm 90:2). Moreover, He brought the universe into existence out of nothing (*ex nihilo*), that is, without preexisting materials (Romans 4:17; Hebrews 11:3).

¹ All Bible citations are from the New International Version (2011) unless otherwise noted.

² NASB refers to the New American Standard Bible.

Belief in the eternity of matter and the theory that the universe evolved on its own are therefore inconsistent with, and, indeed antagonistic to, biblical faith.

The Reality of Creation

Chapters 1 and 2 of Genesis accurately communicate God's creation of the heavens and the earth. Using language that appears to employ both prose and poetry, and that contains both literal and symbolic elements, the story is a simple, yet beautiful and compelling, narrative intended to speak to people in all ages.

The intricate design and delicate balance of creation is so complex that humans will never fully comprehend it—only the Creator himself can do so. But the message that God alone is Creator plainly has been communicated to all who through the ages hear and read the Genesis account. The simplicity, power, and beauty of these creation narratives contrast vividly with competing pagan myths from the ancient Near East.

Some have contended that the first two chapters of Genesis are poetical and are to be taken as parables. But a comparison of poetical references to creation (Deuteronomy 32, 33; Job 38:4–11; Psalms 90; 104:5–9) shows that the Genesis account is in prose form, though it may contain some poetic language. Even so, poetry in the Bible, as in other literature, often describes actual, historical events, so the use of poetry does not make this account fictional.

Only God Can Create

It is also evident that no part of God's creation, angel or human, is creative in the sense God is. The Hebrew word for "create" (*bara'*) always has God as the subject of the verb. This word is used for God's work of creation and is also used to indicate that God will do something unusual and unprecedented. For example, it is used when God said to Israel at Sinai: "I will do wonders never before done [*bara'*, "created"] in any nation in all the world" (Exodus 34:10).

The significance of the Hebrew verb *bara'* is also illustrated when God spoke through Isaiah to his stubborn people, "From now on I will tell you of new things . . . They are created [*bara'*] now, and not long ago" (Isaiah 48:6–7). As in the first chapter of Genesis, the word *bara'*, "to create," is used only of completely new and unprecedented acts of God; that is, of the creation of the heavens and the earth in the beginning, of the creation of the first animal life in the sea (1:21), and of man and woman in God's own image (1:27). At other times, the words "made" (*'asah*) and "formed" (*yatsar*) are used. So the word "create" (*bara'*) emphasizes that God alone is the Great Creator of all.

Creation Is Purposeful

God had a stated purpose in creation. He created "for his own ends" (Proverbs 16:4) and for His glory (Isaiah 43:7). He "formed [the earth] to be inhabited" by his own animate creatures (Isaiah 45:18). All creation is thus an expression of His will and His power.

Moreover, order, progress, and climax are all woven into the biblical account of creation. Order is seen in the careful structuring of the various stages of creative activity in a six-day format, evening to morning. Progress can be seen in the sequential development and filling out of the earth and its inhabitants, and in the increase of personal attention God gave to His creative work. Of the vegetation we read that God said, "'Let the land produce vegetation' . . . And it was so" (Genesis 1:11–12). Of the animals we read that

God said, “Let the land produce living creatures’ . . . And it was so” (vv. 24–25). But of the human race God, using strikingly personal and plural language, said, “Let us make mankind’ . . . So God created mankind . . . male and female he created them” (vv. 26–27). The human race is thus the capstone of God’s creative activity.

The biblical narratives intentionally show careful, intelligent planning and rules out the idea that any part of creation came into being by mere chance. God exercised His wisdom and control at all times (Psalms 136:5; 148:5; Isaiah 45:12; 48:12–13) and brought the entire created order to a complete and well-designed climax (Genesis 1:31).

The Nature of the Creator

It is important to note that Scripture focuses our attention not so much on the technical details of God’s creative activity as on the Creator himself. From Genesis 1:1 to 2:3, God’s presence and activity are primary. We read that “God created,” “God said,” “God saw,” God “separated,” “God called [named],” “God made,” “God set [placed],” “God blessed,” and God “rested.” The God of creation acted deliberately and decisively through His spoken word to bring about His intended purposes (Isaiah 55:10).

The creation accounts further show the Creator to be intelligent, loving, and personal. In contrast to pantheism, He is distinct from His creation (Psalm 90:2). In contrast to deism, He continues to be personally active in His creation. He upholds, sustains, and preserves it (Nehemiah 9:6) and, in His own time, will bring it to consummation (Romans 8:20–21; Colossians 1:16–17; 2 Peter 3:13; Revelation 20–21).

The relational nature of the Creator is seen in His fellowship with the first human pair and His expectations of all His human creatures. Humans are to worship and serve Him as the Creator (Isaiah 40:26,28,31). They are warned not to strive against their Maker (Isaiah 45:9). They are to commit the keeping of their souls to Him in well doing, as unto a faithful Creator (1 Peter 4:19). They are also to recognize that their help comes from the One who made the heavens and the earth (Psalms 121:2; 124:8; 146:5–6), and in effecting His eternal purposes, there is nothing too hard for Him (Jeremiah 32:17).

A Work of the Trinity

The Bible also teaches that creation was a cooperative work of the Trinity. In addition to naming God [the Father] as Creator, the Old Testament shows that “the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters” (Genesis 1:2; Psalm 33:6–7). The New Testament further reveals that Jesus [the Son], who is the one Mediator between God and fallen humanity (1 Timothy 2:5), was the active Agent in creation, “For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth” (Colossians 1:16). This truth is also echoed in John’s Gospel, “Through him [Jesus, the Word] all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made” (John 1:3).

God’s Creation of Humans

The creation story depicts human beings as the zenith of God’s creative activity. Their uniqueness is portrayed in two separate and complementary accounts. Genesis chapter 1 is a terse overview of all creation while Genesis chapter 2 shows that God lavished very personal and particular attention on the creation of both Adam and Eve. Significantly, it was only humans of whom God said, “Let us make mankind [“human being,” not exclusively “male”] in our image, in our likeness” (1:26), “so that they may rule . . . over all the creatures” (1:26). Neither the previous inanimate or animate

creation was so described. In those creative activities, God had simply said, “Let there be’...And it was so” (as in Genesis 1:6–7).

Being made in the image of God (Genesis 1:26–27), human beings are free, rational, capable of self-appreciation and self-expression, capable of moral and spiritual understanding, and created for fellowship with each other and with God. That the first human pair, made in God’s image, would fall and lead the race into sin (3:1ff.) was hardly a surprise for the Creator, who nonetheless purposed to create and redeem them through Christ. To be sure, the image of God divinely stamped on the race would be marred by sin (Genesis 3). But Jesus Christ was destined “before the creation of the world” (1 Peter 1:20) to redeem fallen humankind and include His redeemed people in the final reconciliation of the universe (Romans 8:21; 1 Corinthians 15:20–28; Ephesians 1:4; Colossians 1:19).

While some think that the account of human creation is merely parabolic and not to be taken literally, Genesis pointedly declares God formed Adam from the dust of the earth and breathed into him the breath of life (2:7). Subsequently, God deliberately made Eve from Adam’s rib [perhaps “side”] (2:22). Both Adam and Eve, male and female, are declared to be made in the “image” and “likeness” of God. These carefully delineated creative acts indicate that humans are distinct from animals. God did not form Adam from some previously existing creature (1 Corinthians 15:39). Any evolutionary theory, including theistic evolution/evolutionary creationism, that claims all forms of life arose from a common ancestry is thereby ruled out.

Moreover, the New Testament treats the first Adam as a historical person (Romans 5:14; 1 Corinthians 15:45; 1 Timothy 2:13–14). Adam is named as the first human in Luke’s genealogy (Luke 3:38) and Jesus pointed out, authoritatively citing Genesis 1:27, that “at the beginning, the Creator ‘made them male and female’” (Matthew 19:4; Mark 10:6). Paul spoke of Adam and Jesus as historical persons, recognizing Adam as the beginning of the human race. “For Adam was formed first, then Eve” (1 Timothy 2:13). “[T]he first man Adam became a living being” (2 Corinthians 15:45) and “a pattern of the one [Christ] to come” (Romans 5:14), thus definitively linking Adam with Christ, “the last Adam.” Adam is the “one man” by whom sin and death came (Romans 5:12; 1 Corinthians 15:22). Jude 14 also cited Adam as the beginning of the race.

We strongly affirm that Adam and Eve were real, historical persons whose fall into sin (Genesis 3) is likewise historical. Both their and our redemption is historically effected through Christ, the “second Adam.” To suggest that Adam is not a historical person uniquely created by God may well diminish vital biblical teachings on the nature of humankind, their fall into sin, and, perhaps, the nature of Christ himself.

Creation and Science

The discoveries of science have frequently been utilized by skeptics to question the accuracy of the biblical accounts. In response, believing scientists and biblical scholars consider no fundamental conflict to exist between God’s Word and His works. The theories of scientists are routinely modified with the introduction of new evidence. But the Scriptures, properly interpreted, are always the final, unchanging authority for Christian faith.

Christians historically have believed that “all truth is God’s truth.” God reveals himself finally and authoritatively in the Scriptures, His special revelation. In a subsidiary but nonconflicting way, He also reveals himself in the general revelation of His created order. Not surprisingly, many scientists have observed that the universe is fine-tuned to be capable of supporting life. There are many constants, which differing even slightly,

would make life as we know it impossible. These observations are consistent with the testimony of the ancient Psalmist, “The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge. . . . Yet their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world” (Psalm 19:1–2,4).

Ultimately, then, when God’s Word and God’s Work are properly understood and taught by reverent scholarship, there is no disunity. “For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse” (Romans 1:20). God has revealed himself in such a way as to invite us into reverent exploration of His nature both through His Word and His work—the Bible and scientific exploration.

In conclusion, we affirm that God and God alone is the designer and creator of the universe and of life. The Bible from beginning to end identifies God as the Creator. “By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God’s command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible” (Hebrews 11:3). “For he spoke, and it came to be; he commanded, and it stood firm” (Psalm 33:9).