

ORIGINS



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Dedication

To Dottie

“A good wife is her husband’s pride and joy.”

—Proverbs 12:4

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Introduction

The first three chapters of Genesis provide the context in which the rest of Scripture finds its meaning. These chapters show us the identity of the only true God, and the origin of our world and of the diverse species with which we share the planet. They reveal the privileges and responsibilities with which we were created, the meaning of our existence, and how sin and death first entered our world. They expose the battle going on between good and evil, and provide the first hints of God's plan to defeat the evil one and restore us to Him. These three chapters are crucial for our understanding of God, ourselves, and our world.

One purpose of this book is to encourage the reader to review the biblical teaching about origins carefully. Even when read superficially, Genesis 1–3 is a fascinating history of Creation and the Fall. There are important issues here: creation of an unspoiled world without violence or death; creation by command (*fiat*) in six days; special creation of humans in God's image. These are basic facts of biblical teaching, and denying their importance exposes one to spiritual danger. But these chapters contain much more.

A second purpose is to show how the doctrine of a six-day Creation affects all aspects of our Christian view of life. In the Creation story, we find the meaning of marriage and family, of responsibility and work,

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and of Sabbath rest. In the story of the Fall, we discover how we and our world became estranged from God, a condition that has brought suffering and death—but also the promise that the serpent, the originator of evil, would eventually be crushed. It is what Genesis 3 tells us about the Fall that enables us to understand our need of a Savior and the reason for our dependence on God’s grace. The gospel story is grounded in the events of Genesis 1–3.

A third purpose in writing is to warn against the effects of diluting the biblical teaching of Creation and the Fall. It has become quite fashionable in some circles to deny creation without violence and death, creation in six days, special creation of humans, and much more. Even within the church, we hear voices of disbelief calling us to “grow up” and move beyond the biblical teaching. This shouldn’t surprise us; we’ve been warned that in the end time, major conflicts will erupt over Creation and the gospel.¹ In view of the importance of these issues, it is vital that we each are informed regarding them and their implications.

Many people have helped with the development of the ideas in this book. Ronny Nalin, Raul Esperante, Tim Standish, Kathy Ching, Ariel Roth, Humberto Rasi, Richard Davidson, Gerhard Pfandl, and Nancy and Gerald Vyhmeister each reviewed one or more chapters, and many other colleagues, too numerous to mention, have contributed to my understanding through conferences and conversations. It’s unlikely that any of these people agree with everything I’ve written here, but their comments and suggestions were important, and I appreciate them. Naturally, any remaining mistakes are my own responsibility.

In addition, I thank my wife, Dottie, for her patience and understanding while I focused my attention on this work. I also thank the two and the twelve for all they have taught me.

1. Revelation 14:6–12; see also White, EG. *Evangelism*. Washington, DC: Review and Herald® Publishing Association (1946), 593, 594.

1 CHAPTER

God and the Universe

“In the beginning God . . .” These words, the first in the Bible, state that God was present at the beginning of creation. God Himself doesn’t have a beginning—He is eternal. Although we struggle to understand what that means, the conclusion is inescapable (see Romans 1:20). Tracing back through history, we find a chain of causes and effects until we reach the beginning of everything. At this point there are no physical causes—if no universe exists, then there’s nothing physical that could be the first cause. We must postulate, then, that at the beginning of existence, there was an eternal, uncaused cause. That cause is God.¹

Someone might argue that the universe is eternal and so doesn’t need a cause—and thus there is no need to postulate a Creator. But the universe cannot be eternal.² If it were eternal, everything in it that could break down would have broken down below the level of individual atoms, reaching maximum disorder (“heat death”), and life could not survive in a universe in that state. But the universe has a great deal of order and shows evidence of having a beginning. Thus one cannot reasonably claim that the universe is eternal. We must conclude, instead, that there was a beginning, and that God existed before the universe came into being. God was at the beginning. This conclusion holds true regardless of when the universe was created.

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God created

Bara, the Hebrew word translated as “created,” is used only for actions done by God, although not always in the sense of *ex nihilo* (out of nothing). In addition to its being used in Genesis 1:1 of the entire work of creation, it is used of the creation of great sea creatures (Genesis 1:21), of humans (Genesis 1:27; 5:1, 2), and of the creating in general that God did during Creation week (Genesis 2:3). We can understand it here as referring to an event beyond human ability.

The universe was not made of preexisting material; it was created from nothing (*ex nihilo*) by the word of God.³ Of course, God *had* to create the universe from nothing because before He created the universe, nothing existed that He could have formed to make the universe. Genesis 1:1 portrays the absolute sovereignty of God. He speaks and it is done (Psalm 33:9; Genesis 1:3ff.).

Scripture also portrays God’s creating as a peaceful process; God doesn’t have to struggle with difficult matter or with other gods. This negates the view of some critical scholars that Genesis is merely a Hebrew version of an ancient creation myth like those of other Near Eastern cultures. No, the Creation story in Genesis is fundamentally different from the creation stories of the surrounding cultures.⁴ Besides the lack of conflict and violence in the creation portrayed in Scripture, the scriptural account differs from those other creation stories in that it pictures God as preexisting and having absolute sovereignty, and it portrays Him as valuing humans highly.

The heavens and the earth

There are different opinions regarding the scope of the Genesis creation—regarding how much of the universe the phrase “the heavens and the earth” refers to. Three major views have been proposed:⁵ that the phrase refers to the entire universe; that it refers to our solar system; or that it refers to planet Earth’s ecosphere.

Proponents of the first view point to *merisms*: literary constructions in which a phrase uses opposites, such as “day and night,” to indicate totality (“all the time”). If “the heavens and the earth” is a merism, then Genesis 1:1 is referring to the creation of the entire universe. This could

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be called the “universal creation” interpretation. Some people have postulated a gap in time between the creation of the universe in verse 1 and the beginning of the six-day Creation in verse 3.⁶ This is known as the “passive gap” theory.

A second view is that “the heavens and the earth” refers to our solar system, not the entire universe. The ancients had no concept of the difference between a solar system and the universe, and the Hebrew language doesn’t have a word that expresses that distinction. Thus, they might have used the ordinary words for “heavens” (*shamayim*) and “earth” (*’eretz*) to describe the creation of the solar system. God could have created the rest of the universe other than our solar system before Creation week, then created our earth and solar system at the beginning of that week, or during it, then prepared the earth for living things, and then populated the earth with those living things during Creation week. This view could be called the “solar system creation” interpretation. In this case, we might not interpret Genesis 1:1 as referring to creation of the universe from nothing, while pointing out that other texts do affirm creation of the universe *ex nihilo*.⁷

A third interpretation is that the term “the heavens and the earth” refers to our earth’s ecosphere.⁸ Proponents of this view say our planet could have been in a lifeless state, much like Venus or Mars, for an undetermined length of time prior to Creation week. Then, during Creation week, God transformed a previously uninhabitable planet Earth into an organized and inhabited world. We can call this the “ecosphere creation” interpretation.

Other textual evidence can help us to determine whether the entire universe was created at the same time as our world, or whether other parts of the universe might have existed before Creation week. Note, for instance, Job 38:4–7. It speaks of “sons of God” rejoicing when God created our world. Obviously, they had been created before Creation week. And the presence of Satan in the Garden of Eden (in the form of a serpent) implies a prior history of rebellion and fall (Isaiah 14; Ezekiel 28), as does the “great controversy” metanarrative, which posits the existence and fall of Lucifer before the creation of Adam and Eve.⁹ In addition, there is no record of when the water was created. It is already

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present when the Creation story begins (Genesis 1:2; 2 Peter 3:5).

Regardless of which interpretation we consider to be the best, the Bible is clear that God is the Creator of the entire universe and of our world and its inhabitants, and that He created it all from nothing by the power of His word.

The heavens declare

We can tell something about builders by the design and quality of the buildings they construct. Of course, one needs to know the purpose for which the building was intended: we wouldn't expect an office building to look like a church or a house to look like a grocery store. Various factors determine the design of a building: among them, the way the building will be used, our esthetics and resources, and other factors, such as climate and topography. We may be able to infer some of these constraints by examining the design and function of the building. Similarly, we can make inferences regarding the Builder of the universe when we examine its structure and design.¹⁰

First, we see a universe that is vast. From our perspective, it seems infinite—it extends beyond our ability to see either directly or using our most sophisticated technology. Nor can we measure the tremendous amounts of matter and energy in the universe. The size of the universe implies that the Creator's power and abilities are unlimited.

Second, we see order in the universe. Matter is arranged in interesting groupings, forming such things as spiral galaxies and black holes. Matter and energy interact in regular patterns that we can describe using mathematical equations. This, in itself, is truly remarkable, and it argues for a purposeful creation. There is no other reason that the universe should have such mathematical properties. The order in the universe also tells us something important. All the physical systems we observe tend to become more disorderly over time. This is considered to be one of the laws of nature. The orderliness of our universe shows it was created with order and is not eternal. If it were eternal, it would now be completely disordered.

Observation of the universe also tells us that it has the properties necessary to support life. This cannot be attributed to chance; it must

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be the result of intelligent planning. We can demonstrate this with a thought experiment.

Imagine that you were given the task of designing a universe where life could exist and thrive. Picture yourself in front of a wall on which there are fifty dials that control the physical properties of the universe. Your job is to choose a value for each physical property and set each dial accordingly. For example, you must determine how strong the force of gravitational attraction between objects should be, and what properties the fundamental particles that comprise matter should have. You must decide how much mass and electrical charge each particle should have, and how the particles should be held together to form atoms, and how strong the nuclear forces should be. To find the right combination of values for all fifty dials simultaneously would be a daunting task indeed.

However, the problem is much more difficult than even those fifty dials might suggest. Scientists say the universe is finely tuned. They have found that if life is to exist, the values for the various physical properties of the universe must be set at very precise levels. The slightest error would produce a universe very different from the one we inhabit. The possibility of all those dials being set just where they would have to be for life to exist is too small to support the idea that it could have happened by chance.

God was completely free to create any kind of universe He wanted. He could have chosen any number of combinations of different values for the various physical laws and forces, depending on His purpose for the universe. The fitness of our universe for life cannot be the result of chance. It is the result of intelligent planning. The fine-tuning of the physical constants tells us that the Creator is infinitely intelligent and that He intended for life to exist.

The vastness and order of the universe, together with its being precisely formed so as to be fit for life, is powerfully consistent with the biblical revelation of the Creator God. He created freely, with unlimited power, wisdom, and resources. He is consistent and rules by laws of His own choosing, which means that we would expect the universe to have both regularities that we can discover through

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systematic study and singularities beyond the reach of our minds or other resources. Truly, the heavens do declare the glory of God (Psalm 19:1).

Big bang theory

Scientists have tried to explain the origin and structure of the universe by studying its features. This brings a dilemma. Scientists used to include God in their explanations, but this is no longer considered acceptable. As currently practiced, science is strictly naturalistic—which means it excludes any discussion of God or supernatural causes. To be considered scientific, an explanation for the origin of the universe must refer only to physical processes. This means that if the universe actually was created by a supernatural act, science would never know it—its philosophy precludes it from ever knowing the truth.

The current scientific theory of the origin of the universe is known as the big bang theory.¹¹ This theory recognizes that the universe had a beginning, but it doesn't explain what caused the beginning. Rather, it assumes a beginning and tries to use the known physical laws to explain the present structure of the universe. Nevertheless, the question of the origin of the universe continues to be important.

The idea that the universe had a beginning raises challenging questions for naturalistic scientists. For people who deny the existence of God, it is philosophically preferable to suppose that the universe is eternal, because there is no need to explain the origin of something that is eternal. Because of this philosophical bias, naturalistic scientists experienced considerable discomfort when evidence was discovered that suggested the universe had a beginning and isn't eternal. That evidence came from observations made by astronomer Edwin Hubble in 1929.

Hubble noted that stars in different parts of the universe produce light of slightly different colors and that some of the light seemed “red-shifted”; that is, the wavelength of that light was longer, and the greater the distance from the earth, the greater the shift in the wavelength. (Red light has a longer wavelength than do the other colors of light.) The explanation for this “red shift” seemed to be that the stars were moving away from the earth rapidly enough that the light waves from distant stars were taking longer to reach the earth, causing them to be

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redder. And the more distant galaxies seemed to be moving away from earth faster than the nearer ones. All this led to the idea that the stars must be moving apart, which implies that they were closer together in the past than they are now.

If the stars used to be closer together than they are now, then, if you go far enough back in time, you must reach a time when all of the stars were crowded together. In fact, scientists have concluded that there must have been a time when all the stars were joined together in a single point of unimaginable energy. They believe that not only the stars, but time and space also must have been contained in that single point. The point, then, expanded rapidly, causing time to begin and, in a process that has occupied about thirteen to fourteen billion years, forming the stars and galaxies that we see today. This theory cannot be true unless the universe had a beginning.

At first, scientists with a naturalistic viewpoint opposed the idea that the universe had a beginning. One of them, British astronomer Sir Fred Hoyle, derisively called the theory the “big bang.” The name stuck, and we still refer to the theory as the “big bang theory.”

This theory stimulated new ideas, one of them being that if the big bang was true, there should be some heat from the big bang still present throughout the universe, and it should be uniformly distributed in all parts of the universe. In 1964, scientists did indeed discover “cosmic microwave background radiation,” which fit the specifications of the theory. This discovery led to general acceptance of the big bang theory by scientists.

The big bang theory also explains the abundance of elements in the universe—for example, explaining why hydrogen and helium are very abundant while the heavier elements are relatively rare. Although the big bang theory is regarded as the best explanation scientists have of the history of the universe, it shouldn’t be regarded as beyond dispute. Some scientists do not accept it.

The Bible and the big bang

Does the big bang theory contradict the Bible, or is it consistent with Scripture, at least to some extent?¹²

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The most important point of agreement is that both beliefs indicate that the universe had a beginning, that it isn't eternal. On some other points, the two accounts may be taken as complementary. The big bang theory provides no explanation for the origin of the universe, while the Bible identifies God as its Creator. The theory doesn't explain why the universe is so finely designed for life, while the Bible indicates that God intended it to support living organisms.

One important point where there may be conflict between the Bible and the big bang theory is the amount of time involved. Scientists have no explanation for what made the universe begin, but given a starting point, they have calculated that presently observed processes would take about 13.7 billion years to produce the universe as we now observe it. The extent of conflict with Genesis 1:1 depends on how that text is interpreted. However, any proposal that restricts the Creator to the processes described in the big bang theory will unavoidably conflict with the teaching of Scripture that God is absolutely sovereign over creation and its "laws."

The idea that God could have created the universe using a process something like the big bang might be consistent with some interpretations of Genesis 1:1. However, some conflict is unavoidable due to rejection of the supernatural events of Creation week by those who hold the big bang theory. Both the "ecosphere creation" and "solar system creation" interpretations allow for creation of the universe before Genesis 1:1. The "universe creation" interpretation could allow for the earth to exist in a lifeless state for some unknown period of time between Genesis 1:1 and Genesis 1:2. The big bang model might describe what happened during that time gap, but there would still be a conflict over the timing of the events of Creation week. There is probably no way to harmonize the big bang theory with the interpretation that the entire universe was created at the beginning of the six-day Creation of Genesis 1. But, as we noted earlier in this chapter, the "universe creation" doesn't fit some of the biblical data well either. The position favored here is that, regardless of which interpretation of Genesis 1:1 one prefers, the universe wasn't created during Creation week, but at a previous time.

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Conclusions

Genesis 1:1 is one of the most profound statements in Scripture. It identifies God as the Creator of all, implying His eternal existence, His omnipotence, and His creative wisdom. It explains the order and design so clearly seen in the universe. It confirms our intuition that there is a reason for our existence and reminds us that our scientific reach is limited. It is the foundation upon which we build our view of reality and our place in the universe.

1. This argument was famously made by Thomas Aquinas in *Summa Theologica*, First Part, Question 2, Article 3.

2. For recent thinking, see Grossman, L. "Death of the Eternal Cosmos." *New Scientist* 213 (January 14, 2012):6, 7.

3. E.g., Psalm 33:6–9; John 1:1–13; Colossians 1:16; Hebrews 11:3.

4. Shea, WH. "A Comparison of Narrative Elements in Ancient Mesopotamian Creation-Flood Stories With Genesis 1-9." *Origins* 11(1984):9–29; Copan, P. and WL. Craig. *Creation Out of Nothing*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker (2004), 29–36.

5. Andreasen, N-E. "The Word 'Earth' in Genesis 1:1." *Origins* 8(1981):13–19; Hasel, GF. "The Meaning of Genesis 1:1." *Ministry* 49/1(1976):21–24; Roth, AA. *Origins: Linking Science and Scripture*. Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald® (1998), 316; Regalado, FO. "The Creation Account in Genesis 1: Our World Only or the Universe?" *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 13/2(2002):108–120.

6. Davidson places the gap between verses 2 and 3; Davidson, RM. "The Biblical Account of Origins," *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 14/1(2003):4–43; see also Younker, RW. *God's Creation: Exploring the Genesis Story*, Nampa, ID: Pacific Press® Publishing Association (1999), 33–35.

7. See Copan, P. and WL. Craig (2004).

8. "Ecosphere" refers to all the earth's living organisms and their physical environment.

9. See White, EG. *Patriarchs and Prophets*. Nampa, ID: Pacific Press® (2002), chapters 1–3.

10. Roth, AA. *Science Discovers God*. Hagerstown, MD: Autumn House, (2008); Heeren, F. *Show Me God*. 2nd ed. Wheeling, IL: Daystar Publications (2000).

11. Numerous references can be found on the Internet.

12. See de Groot, M. "The Big Bang Model: An Appraisal." *College and University Dialogue* 10/1(1998):9–12.