

Is There A God? – Question # 6

Write two or three paragraphs (or more if you like) on the hermeneutical/exegetical issues surrounding Genesis Chapter One. What is your argument for how we should interpret this central chapter in the Bible?

In evaluating this question, I believe it is helpful to provide an overview of the range of the most prominent positions as it relates to Genesis, evolution, etc.

SPECTRUM OF CREATION BELIEFS From Flat Earthism to Atheist Evolutionism

This Spectrum shows some of these differences between major types of creationism. Beliefs in the table are listed from most **conservative** to most **liberal** biblical interpretations.

Type of Creationism		Allows for Faith?	Literal Reading of Genesis?	Allows for Evolution?
1	Flat Earth	Yes	Yes	No
2	Geocentrist	Yes	Yes	No
3	Young Earth Creationism	Yes	Yes	No
4	Old Earth Creationism	Yes	Longer Timeline	Varies
4a	Gap Creationism	Yes	Longer w/ with Gaps	No
4b	Day-Age Creationism	Yes	Longer Days	No
4c	Progressive Creationism	Yes	Longer + Interventions	Microevolution
4d	Intelligent Design	Yes	Longer + Interventions	Microevolution
5	Theistic Evolution	Yes	Varies	Yes
5a	Evolutionary Creationism	Yes	Outside Normal Time	Yes
5b	Theistic Evolution	Yes	No	Yes
6	Deistic Evolution	Maybe	No	Yes
7	Agnostic Evolution	Maybe	No	Yes
8	Atheistic Evolution	No	No	Yes

Source: <http://www.allviewpoints.org/RESOURCES/EVOLUTION/spectrum.htm>

More detailed descriptions of each perspective are provided at [The_Creation/Evolution_Continuum](#) website. Categories 1-3 represent “Young Earth Creationism” (YEC). It is recognized that position # 3 is the most prominent of this broad category. Because of the incompatibility of these positions with modern scientific evidence, I do not consider any of them to be viable. For any of these positions to be valid, it would be necessary that God created the universe, the earth, and living organisms in a deceptive manner. Such a conclusion is inconsistent with the character of God as reflected in the scriptures. Accordingly, the varying levels of literal interpretation reflected by YEC positions 1-3 are considered to be incompatible with God’s general revelation. Consequently, they are categorically rejected.

Positions 6-8 are incompatible with a Christian worldview as they fail to recognize the role of Yahweh in creation. Accordingly, these positions are also categorically rejected.

The remaining possibilities fall under the broad categories of “Old Earth Creationism” (# 4) and “Theistic Evolution” (# 5). It is recognized that there may be some variation in the definitions among proponents of the various views reflected in the table on the previous page. Nevertheless, these general categories are considered to be valuable for the purpose of evaluating the various positions held by those who maintain a Christian worldview and also accept the general age of the earth to be approximately 4.6 billion years (consistent with prevailing scientific evidence).

As reflected in the table, one of the characteristics that distinguishes category # 4 from category # 5 is the issue of [Macroevolution](#). Personally, I had never considered category # 5 until I read [The Language of God](#). The book includes compelling evidence from the [Human Genome Project](#) for [Common Descent](#). I consider both general revelation (nature) as well as special revelation (scripture) to be from God. Accordingly, it seems logical to develop hermeneutical principles for interpreting the special revelation that recognizes the extensive general revelation that has been provided over that last 13.7 +/- billion years.

In evaluating the various perspectives within the broad category of “Old Earth Creationism” (# 4), it is noted that Intelligent Design (ID) is more of a scientific philosophy than a specific perspective on the interpretation of Genesis. While it is similar to Progressive Creationism in terms of its implications regarding evolution, it does not address hermeneutics. The remaining perspectives (4a, 4b & 4c) are considered below.

4a) [Gap Creationism](#) – Gap Creationism—also known as Gap Theory, Restitution Creationism, and Ruin-Resurrection Creationism, Gap Creationism—represents an efforts to bring science and religion together by looking between the lines of Genesis to see where geologic (but *not evolutionary*) science might fit.

4b) [Day-Age Creationism](#) – Day-Age Creationists believe that the days of Genesis are not 24-hour days and can be read more accurately as years (thousands, millions or billions of years). This is considered a more liberal interpretation of Genesis because of this change in the length of the days of creation; however, Day-Age Creationists are not necessarily any more receptive to evolution.

4c) [Progressive Creationism](#) - This is a somewhat liberal interpretation of Genesis that allows billions of years for cosmic evolution, including the Big Bang. Progressive Creationists also allows some roll for natural development of life forms (microevolution), but only after God has stepped in to create the major species at various points in time—culminating with the creation of man.

After considering these views, I am convinced that the [Literary Framework View](#) provides the best harmony between God’s general and special revelations. A book entitled [Across the Spectrum](#) surveyed a number of controversial issues relevant to Evangelical Christianity. One chapter addressed the issue of “The Genesis Debate”. The following excerpt provides the rationale behind the “Literary Framework View”.

“Young earth creationists try to force modern science into a literal reading of Genesis 1. Day-age theorists try to fit Genesis 1 into modern science. Proponents of the restoration view try to have their cake and eat it too by inserting a speculative gap between verses 1 and 2 of this chapter. All three views

are fundamentally misguided and are rooted in contradictory opinions about the meaning and significance of various words and phrases in Genesis 1 (e.g., "day," "formless void"). None of them have seriously considered the more fundamental question concerning the kind of literature we are dealing with in Genesis 1.

More specifically, young earth creationists, day-age theorists, and restorationists (Gap theorists) all assume that the author of this passage was centrally concerned with providing his audience with a literal chronology of how creation came about—though they disagree over the length and nature of this chronology. The literary framework view is that the biblical author was interested in nothing of the sort. The discussion surrounding the seven days of creation was not meant to satisfy a quasi-scientific curiosity about the order of creation. Rather, it provided a literary framework within which the author could effectively express the Hebraic conviction that one God created the world by bringing order out of chaos. He was interested in thematic rather than chronological organization.

We can appreciate the thematic organization of this chapter best if we step back from the various issues related to particular terms and look at the structure of the chapter as a whole.

*The first verse (1:1) functions as a general introductory statement. The second verse (1:2) sets forth a problem that the rest of the chapter is going to solve. The problem is one with which ancient Near Eastern people would have been familiar: The world is engulfed in a primordial chaos. More specifically, the earth is enveloped in "darkness," covered by "the deep," and in a state that is "formless" and "void" (*tohu wabohu*). The author's goal was to show how Yahweh solved each of these problems and thus succeeded in bringing order out of chaos.*

The creation week is divided into two groups of three days (days 1-3 and 4-6) with the seventh day acting as a capstone. Within each three-day grouping, four creative acts of God are identified by the phrase "Let there be . . ." Most significantly, the creative acts in the second group mirror the creative acts in the first group. That is, day four mirrors day one; day five mirrors day two; and day six mirrors day three.

The first set of three days addresses the problems of the darkness, the deep, and the formlessness of the earth as spelled out in 1:2. God addresses these problems by creating spaces within which things may exist. The second set of three days addresses the voidness problem of 1:2. God solves this problem by creating things to fill the spaces he created in the first three days.

More specifically, on day one God created light (which addressed the darkness problem) and separated it from the darkness (1:3-5). On day two God created the heavens (which addressed the watery abyss problem) and used it to separate the waters above from the waters below (1:6-8). On day three God created dry land and vegetation (addressing the formless earth problem) and separated the earth from the waters below (1:9-13). Thus, by the end of day three the first three problems had been addressed: darkness, water, formlessness.

The second set of three days addresses the final problem of voidness—the lack of things to fill the spaces God has created. This is how the second set mirrors the first set of days. Day four fills the space created on day one. Day five fills the space created on day two. And day six fills the space created on day three.

More specifically, on day four God creates the lights to fill the skies that he created on day one (1:14-19). On day five God creates fish and birds to fill the water and air that he created on day two (1:20-23). And

on day six God creates animals and humans to fill the dry land that he created on day three (1:24-31). On day seven God rested from his labor, celebrating the goodness of creation (2: 1-4).

The following charts summarize the findings. (2nd chart obtained from another source)

Problem	Solution: Stage 1	Solution: Stage 2
Formless void	Forming place (days 1–3)	Filling void (days 4–6)
Darkness	Day 1: light/separate darkness	Day 4: lights
The deep	Day 2: heavens/separate waters	Day 5: birds/fish
Formless earth	Day 3: earth/vegetation	Day 6: animal/humans

produce form by separation		fill each form
1	separating <i>day</i> and <i>night</i>	4 sun and moon for <i>day</i> and <i>night</i>
2	separating <i>sky</i> and <i>sea</i>	5 <i>sky animals, sea animals</i>
3	separating <i>land</i> and <i>sea</i> , <i>land plants</i> are created	6 <i>land animals and humans,</i> <i>plants are used for food</i>

Source: <http://www.asa3.org/ASA/education/origins/fw.htm>

Genesis 1 is thematically and logically organized and expresses how the Creator solves the problems he needs to solve in order to bring creation out of chaos. Therefore, we have every reason to suppose that the succession of days was not meant to refer to a chronological succession but to a logical, thematic, and literary succession.

In this respect, Genesis 1 is not exceptional. Though it may strike modern historically minded people as odd, biblical authors frequently emphasized thematic unity over historical exactitude. For example, it is a well-known fact that some Gospel authors grouped Jesus' sayings and deeds by theme rather than by the order in which they occurred historically. As a result, the order of events in the Gospels differs considerably, just as the order of events in Genesis 1 and Genesis 2 differ significantly. This would be of concern only if the authors intended to provide an exact account of how things happened historically. If their concern was more thematic, as we suggest, then the contradictions are inconsequential.”¹

While this book does not specifically address “Progressive Creationism” (as advocated by such apologists as Hugh Ross, etc.), the comments are still applicable as the chronology and “day” = “era” assumptions are comparable to those associated with “Day-Age Creationism”. In view of these observations, I consider the “Literary Framework View” to be the preferred basis for interpreting Genesis 1.

Before concluding this analysis, some discussion of the issue of “myth” as it relates to the book of Genesis seems appropriate. An excellent book addressing this topic is [Inspiration and Incarnation](#). Some relevant excerpts are provided on the following pages.

¹ Gregory A. Boyd & Paul R. Eddy, *Across the Spectrum*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 67-69

"The degree to which Genesis and Enuma Elish are truly parallel is a debated point, but some of the more agreed upon similarities are the following:

- 1) *The sequence of the days of creation is similar, including the creation of the firmament, dry land, luminaries, and humanity, followed by rest.*
- 2) *Darkness precedes the creative acts.*
- 3) *There is a division of the waters (waters above and below the firmament).*
- 4) *Light exists before the creation of the sun, moon, and stars.*

However different the two stories may be, they unquestionably share a common way of speaking about the beginning of the world; both Genesis and Enuma Elish "breathe the same air." Whether or not the author of Genesis was familiar with the text known to us as Enuma Elish, he was certainly working within a similar conceptual world. So, as unwise as it is to equate the two, it is also ill advised to make such a sharp distinction between them that the clear similarities are brushed aside. The Genesis account must be understood in its ancient context, and stories like Enuma Elish help us glimpse what that context looked like. One could suggest that the purpose of Genesis was to contrast such ancient Near Eastern stories as Enuma Elish. The God of Genesis simply speaks things into being. It is reasonable to suggest that the Genesis story is meant to be contrasted to the reigning Babylonian ideology; that is, one could argue that an important purpose of the Genesis story is to argue that the God of Israel is truly mighty and that he is solely and fully in control of the cosmos. His creation of the world is an act of his will, not the result of a power struggle within a dysfunctional divine family. We must remember that such a contrast can be fully appreciated only when we first acknowledge that the Genesis story is firmly rooted in the worldview of its time.

My intention is not to argue precisely where and how the Akkadian texts-Enuma Elish, Atrahasis, and Gilgamesh-parallel the biblical accounts. This is done too often, and it is typically done on the basis of an assumption that I very much call into question, namely, that the more Genesis looks like the Akkadian texts, the less inspired it is. Critical scholars tend to augment the similarities, even going beyond what has been warranted, and draw the general conclusion that Genesis is fundamentally no different from other ancient stories. On the other hand, conservative Christian scholars, particularly early on, have tended to employ a strategy of selective engagement of the evidence: highlighting extra-biblical evidence that conforms to or supports traditional views of the Bible, while either ignoring, downplaying, or arguing against evidence to the contrary. Regardless, both sides of the debate recognize that there is some relationship between the Akkadian texts and their biblical counterparts. If we can properly define the nature of that relationship, debates about the implications of that relationship will fall into place.

The problem raised by these Akkadian texts is whether the biblical stories are historical: how can we say logically that the biblical stories are true and the Akkadian stories are false when they both look so very much alike? It is a common position among many modern scholars and biblically educated people that the ancient Near Eastern creation and flood stories are myth. This has led to the suggestion that the biblical story of creation is every bit as fanciful and unhistorical as the ancient Near Eastern stories.

Christians recoil from any suggestion that Genesis is in any way embedded in the mythologies of the ancient world. On one level this is understandable. After all, if the Bible and the gospel are true, and if that truth is bound up with historical events, you can't have the beginning of the Bible get it so wrong. It is important to understand, however, that not all historians of the ancient Near East use the word myth simply as shorthand for "untrue," "made-up," "storybook." It may include these ideas for some, but many who use the term are trying to get at something deeper. A more generous way of defining myth is that it

is “an ancient, pre-modern, pre-scientific way of addressing questions of ultimate origins and meaning in the form of stories: Who are we? Where do we come from?”

Ancient peoples were not concerned to describe the universe in scientific terms. In fact, to put the matter more strongly: scientific investigation was not at the disposal of ancient Near Eastern peoples. The scientific world in which we live and that we take so much for granted was inconceivable to ancient Mesopotamians. But ancient peoples, perhaps more contemplative than we are today, owing to the simplicity and rigor of their lives, wonder how it is that things are the way they are. Where does the sun go at night—or how did it get up there to begin with, and what keeps it from falling down like everything else does that gets tossed up in the air? Why are there seasons? Why does the moon move across the sky? Where does rain come from, and why does it seem to not be there when we need it most? Why do things grow out of the ground? Why do some animals feed off others? How did all we see around us begin? Of course, not everyone went through this questioning process, but they lived within traditions that had already provided some answers.

Ancient peoples composed lengthy stories to address these types of questions, and on some level the cause was attributed to unknown, powerful figures. It is impossible to know when the stories of the gods arose, but they did. I like to think that the imprint of God is so strong on his creation that, even apart from any knowledge of the true God, ancient peoples just knew that how and why they were here can be explained only by looking outside themselves. So, stories were made up that aimed at answering questions of ultimate meaning. And one way of getting at these kinds of questions was by telling stories about the creation.

But this leads to a big problem for Christians today and their Bible. If the ancient Near Eastern stories are myth (defined in this way as pre-scientific stories of origins), and since the biblical stories are similar enough to these stories to invite comparison, does this indicate that myth is the proper category for understanding Genesis? Before the discovery of the Akkadian stories, one could quite safely steer clear of such a question, but this is no longer the case. We live in a modern world where we have certain expectations of how the world works. We neither understand the ancient ways nor feel that we need to.

To give a hint of where this discussion is going, it is worth asking what standards we can reasonably expect of the Bible, seeing that it is an ancient Near Eastern document and not a modern one. Are the early stories in the Old Testament to be judged on the basis of standards of modern historical inquiry and scientific precision, things that ancient peoples were not at all aware of? Is it not likely that God would have allowed his word to come to the ancient Israelites according to standards they understood, or are modern standards of truth and error so universal that we should expect pre-modern cultures to have understood them? The former position is, I feel, better suited for solving the problem. The latter is often an implicit assumption of modern thinkers, both conservative and liberal Christians, but it is somewhat myopic and should be called into question. What the Bible is must be understood in light of the cultural context in which it was given.

The parallels between the opening chapters of Genesis and Enuma Elish and Atrahasis/Gilgamesh raise the issue whether there is myth in the Old Testament. This has certainly been a pressing issue among evangelicals, for, if Genesis is myth, it seems to bring the Bible down to the level of other ancient literature.

Taking the extra biblical evidence into account, I question how much value there is in posing the choice of Genesis as either myth or history. This distinction seems to be a modern invention. It presupposes-

without stating explicitly that what is historical, in a modern sense of the word, is more real, of more value, more like something God would do, than myth. So, the argument goes, if Genesis is myth, then it is not "of God." Conversely, if Genesis is history, only then is it something worthy of the name "Bible." Again, it is interesting to me that both sides of the liberal/conservative debate share at least to a certain extent these kinds of assumptions. The liberal might answer, "Yes, it is myth, and this proves it is not inspired, and who cares anyway?" The conservative might answer, "Well, since we know that the Bible is God's word, we know it can't be myth." And so great effort is expended to drive as much distance as possible between the Bible and any ancient Near Eastern literature that poses problems.

But one might ask why it is that God can't use the category we call "myth" to speak to ancient Israelites. We seem to think of myth as something ancient people thought up because they didn't want to listen to what God said, and so at the outset of the discussion the Bible is already set up in full contrast to the ancient Near Eastern literature. I don't think this is the case. If some consensus could be reached for an alternative term, it would seem profitable to abandon the word myth altogether, since the term has such a long history of meanings attached to it, which prejudices the discussion from the outset.

What can we take away from all this? There are three points I would like to focus on in conclusion

First, a contemporary evangelical doctrine of Scripture must account for the Old Testament as an ancient Near Eastern phenomenon by going beyond the mere observation of that fact to allowing that fact to affect how we think about Scripture. A doctrine of Scripture that does not think through this incarnational dimension is inadequate in light of the evidence we have.

Second, such a worked-out doctrine of Scripture should have implications for how Christians today use it. In other words, understanding the Old Testament in its ancient Near Eastern setting will raise the question of how normative certain portions of the Old Testament are: if the Old Testament is a cultural phenomenon, how binding is it upon us whose cultural landscape is quite different?

Third, the incarnational dimension of Scripture continues today. Of course, the canon is closed—I am not disputing that for one moment. But, if even the Bible is a cultural phenomenon through and through, we should not be surprised to see that our own theological thinking is wrapped in cultural clothing as well. This is why every generation of Christians in every cultural context must seek to see how God is speaking to them in and through Scripture. It is not that the Bible is a timeless, contextless how-to book that we are meant to apply to today's world. Rather, the Bible itself demonstrates the inevitable cultural dimension of any expression of the gospel. This is not to say that the meaning of the gospel shifts with every cultural wind. It simply means that each generation, by the power of God's Spirit, has to make the gospel message its own by wrestling with how the gospel connects with the world in which that generation is living.”²

The “incarnational” view of scripture draws its parallel from the way “The Word became flesh” (John 1:14). Jesus, who was “in very nature God” (Philippians 2:6) became human in order to “make God known” (John 1:18). In a similar manner, it is reasonable to recognize that God also allowed the written Word to take on a form that would most effectively allow the Israelites to understand “Who are we?” and “Where do we come from?” Considering that they had been enslaved in Egypt for 400 years, they were most likely indoctrinated with a worldview that was shaped by the Akkadian texts. It should not be surprising that God would have “met them on their level” by conveying his message through a familiar

² Peter Enns, *Inspiration and Incarnation*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 26-68 (various excerpts)

genre. The message is no less valid, even if God did communicate through “an ancient, pre-modern, pre-scientific way of addressing questions of ultimate origins and meaning in the form of stories” (myth). Consider the parables of Jesus. No one claims that these stories were rooted in actual, historical events. Nevertheless, the moral lessons were crystal clear to those who were spiritually minded. In a like manner, the message behind the account of the sacrifices offered by Cain and Abel is also crystal clear, regardless of chronological sequencing (or lack thereof) of events observed in Genesis 1.

In conclusion, I am persuaded that recognition of the “incarnational” nature of scripture provides support for the Literary Framework View as the most appropriate hermeneutical perspective for interpreting Genesis 1. I believe this view provides the most reasonable harmonization of God’s general and special revelations, especially in view of modern discoveries in the field of biology.

John Lang