

ENDORSEMENTS

In *Wrestling with God*, Lessing and Steinmann engage some of the Old Testament's most challenging questions. They masterfully employ Scripture to interpret Scripture, illuminating difficult passages with theological depth and pastoral insight. With clarity and sober judgment, they sift through biblical evidence and draw faithful and relevant conclusions.

—**Paul Elliott**, professor of theology, Concordia University Irvine

Being separated from the Old Testament by time, geography, culture, and language makes understanding it a challenge. These Old Testament scholars engage perennial questions about the Old Testament by carefully examining biblical texts within their original settings, but also self-consciously as Christians. Whatever one's opinions on the authors' stances, they are to be commended for helping us read the Old Testament more closely and faithfully.

—**M. Daniel Carroll R. (Rodas)**, PhD, Scripture Press Ministries
Chair of Biblical Studies and Pedagogy, Wheaton College

Readers of the Old Testament are well aware that it contains many puzzling and even disturbing passages. In this volume, Lessing and Steinmann, two seasoned interpreters of the Old Testament, join forces to “wrestle with” some of the most difficult passages. Their thoughtful and reasonable responses to tough questions, including those posed by the violence depicted in the Old Testament and by its portrait of an angry and vengeful God, deserve careful consideration.

—**Robert B. Chisholm Jr.**, chair and senior professor of Old Testament studies, Dallas Theological Seminary

Lessing and Steinmann draw on their decades of teaching and writing on the Old Testament to address the most pressing questions the church asks when reading the Old Testament. Whether readers agree with all of their conclusions or not, *Wrestling with God* is an accessible guide that will force readers to wrestle with God in specific Old Testament texts and the entire Bible for the good of the church.

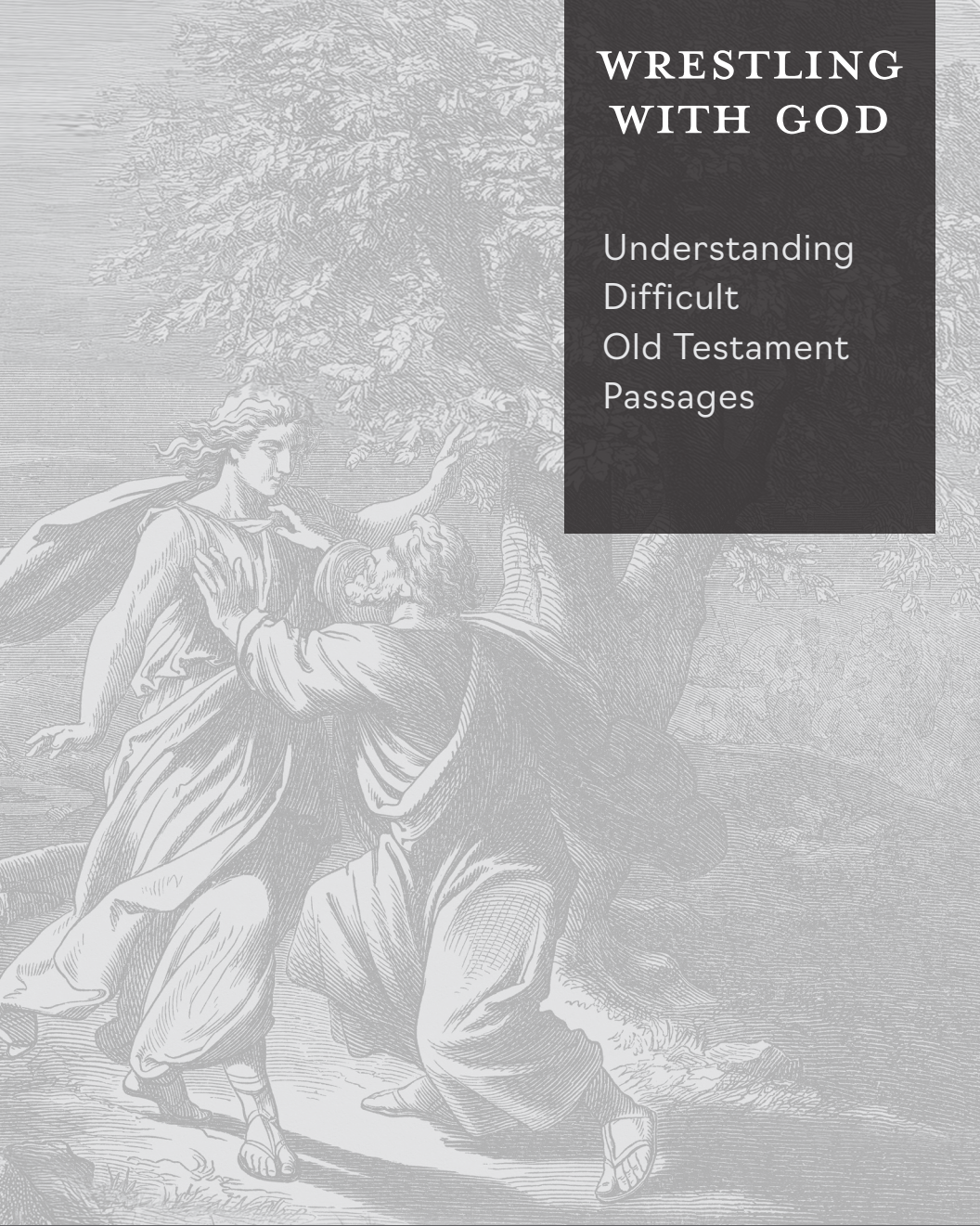
—**Andrew Abernethy**, professor of Old Testament, assistant dean,
director of the MA in biblical exegesis program, Wheaton College

For most Christians, outside of a few familiar places, the Old Testament is a strange, intimidating land into which they dare not venture. Lessing and Steinmann serve as guides to this strange land that makes up three-quarters of the Bible. Their magnificent comprehensive treatment addresses every major misconception of the Old Testament in a way that is easy to understand. Even more helpful are the discussion questions at the end of each chapter, which allow the reader to deepen his or her understanding of the Old Testament and develop a fuller appreciation for God's Word.

—**Rev. Dr. Ryan M. Tietz**, associate professor of exegetical theology, Old Testament, Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne

Wrestling with God clearly comes from pastors who love teaching Bible studies. Rather than dodging the hard questions, this book takes them head-on! With clarity and conviction, Lessing and Steinmann offer us a delightful guide into the murkier parts of the Old Testament. Under the guise of addressing difficult passages, they sneak in a ton of biblical theology—teaching us who God is for us as our Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier—all through the prophetic witness of the Old Testament.

—**Rev. Dr. Geoffrey R. Boyle**, assistant professor of pastoral ministry and missions, Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne



WRESTLING WITH GOD

Understanding
Difficult
Old Testament
Passages

R. REED LESSING
ANDREW E. STEINMANN

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Old Testament Passages

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PREFACE

WRESTLING WITH GOD'S WORD

Genesis 32 and Seeing God More Clearly

“Jacob called the name of the place Peniel.” (Genesis 32:30 ESV)

There is much to love about the Old Testament (hereafter, OT). We marvel at its majestic account of creation in Genesis 1 and thrill to see Moses go toe-to-toe with stubborn Pharaoh in the book of Exodus. The OT features Israel's beautiful tabernacle and Isaiah's stunning prophetic predictions. And who among us isn't moved by David's beautiful psalms, especially Psalm 23? Other OT favorites include the practical applications in the book of Proverbs, as well as Solomon's down-to-earth wisdom in Ecclesiastes. But let's face it, the OT also includes a lot of strange names, strange places, and even stranger events.

After leaving the ark, Noah gets drunk. Abraham and Jacob—among other men—have multiple wives. Moses kills an Egyptian and ends up on the empire's most-wanted list. The book of Judges overflows with sordid stories of rape, mutilation, and murder. And how did some men live so long? Methuselah doesn't die until he's 969 years old!

The OT also incorporates prayers in which people scream and rage at God, insisting that He isn't doing His job right. How would

that go over in our church services? And what about the times when God appears cruel and vindictive, or when the books of Esther and Song of Songs fail to mention His name?

While there are parts of the OT that resonate with light and beauty, a lot of it feels like clothing that doesn't fit or a movie that doesn't make sense or a recipe that doesn't go over well at Thanksgiving. We have to admit that there are a number of places where the OT feels like someone else's home decor that just isn't our style.

Need a few more examples? God changes His mind about having made people, then proceeds to destroy most of them in a worldwide flood (Genesis 6:6–8). Abraham is one hundred and Sarah is ninety when they have their first child, Isaac (Genesis 21:1–7). When Moses speaks to the Israelites about the Canaanites, he says, “Neither make a covenant with them nor show them mercy” (Deuteronomy 7:2). Elisha calls down two bears to maul forty-two children who mock him (2 Kings 2:23–25). Jeremiah laments that God has become like his enemy (Lamentations 2:4–5). And some of the books in the OT are so *long*. Isaiah has sixty-six chapters. Jeremiah, fifty-two. And the book of Psalms? One hundred and fifty! Little wonder Christians have sidelined the OT—“I can't relate to it, and I don't understand it. And to be honest, I have more than just a few problems with it.”

Most Christians don't outright reject the OT. Instead, they pick and choose what they like and discard the rest. “I'll take four chapters in Genesis, eight in Exodus, and a sprinkling of psalms, proverbs, and prophets. You can have everything else—especially Leviticus and Numbers!”

Not content with picking and choosing some parts and rejecting others, some people completely dismiss Israel's Scriptures and argue that these texts are antiquated and irrelevant and contain nothing useful for Christians. That's what Marcion did.

In AD 138, Marcion moved from modern-day Turkey to Rome, where he began teaching that the OT God was different from the New Testament (NT) God. After all, Marcion argued, the God of the OT is angrier and more wrathful than the God of the NT, who in Jesus abounds with grace and mercy. The OT? It's full of violence and vengeance. The NT? It's full of compassion and salvation. End of discussion. There's no need for the OT!

Early Christian leaders like Irenaeus and Tertullian pushed back. They pointed out that Jesus didn't reject the OT (Matthew 5:17), that Paul taught that Israel's Scriptures were divinely inspired (2 Timothy 3:16), that the apostle endorsed these texts as sources of encouragement and hope (Romans 15:4). Based on these verses and others, in AD 144, the church rejected Marcion and his repudiation of the OT. The early church was convinced that it would be catastrophic to preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ apart from Israel's divinely inspired books.

Most Christians don't go as far as Marcion did, yet there remains a general distaste for the OT—an apathy for the Hebrew Scriptures. Churches don't officially renounce Genesis through Malachi, but they often don't see these books as important for faith and life.

Who among us hasn't scratched our head when we read about Moses slaughtering the Midianites or Jephthah sacrificing his daughter? Then there's the custom of taking off a sandal and giving it

to another person to confirm a business partnership. There's even a book called Lamentations. Who needs that? We jettison the OT and go to what makes more sense—Jesus, Peter, Paul, John, and others. Who needs Abraham, Asher, and Aaron? Isn't the OT all Law and the NT all Gospel? And doesn't the NT supersede the OT anyway? My! The historical milieu, culture, and traditions in the OT are so far removed from our twenty-first-century lives; it's a chasm that simply can't be bridged.

The temptation, therefore, is to read the first three chapters in Genesis—rejoice in God's creation, mourn over Adam's fall, embrace the promise of a Savior—then skip the rest and get to Jesus. After all, what's there to lose? Much. Very much.

God's revelation in the OT makes up 75 percent of the Bible. To avoid three-fourths of what God says severely hampers our Christian life and witness. Reading only the NT, along with pieces and snippets of the OT, would stymie our understanding of our Savior. It's time to embrace the OT, learn from it, treasure it—yes, even love it.

That's why we wrote this book—to help you wrestle with some of the most difficult parts of Israel's Scriptures so that you come away with a better understanding of God's Word and a deeper appreciation for its role in your life. We intentionally use the word *wrestle* because growing in our knowledge of the OT takes time, effort, and determination.

Jacob should know.

You remember the story. Jacob steals Esau's blessing. Esau doesn't take it lightly. In fact, he vows to kill Jacob, who hightails it out of Canaan to live in Paddan-aram, or modern-day southeast

Turkey. Fast-forward twenty years, and now the two brothers are about to meet again.

Jacob's anxiety is off the charts. Can you imagine? Esau, his estranged brother, is coming to meet him with four hundred men (Genesis 32:6). This looks like an attacking army, not a welcome-home gathering for a cherished family member. That's why, after dividing his family into two camps, Jacob plans to spend the night alone—probably reiterating his earlier prayer to God (Genesis 32:9–12).

Suddenly, from out of nowhere, someone attacks Jacob. It's Christ Jesus in the form of a man, who will, in the fullness of time, take upon Himself the flesh of a man (John 1:14). Hosea 12:4 calls Him a Messenger, thus confirming that this man is Yahweh's Messenger, whom Israelites sometimes call God—because He is.

This God-man dislocates Jacob's hip. Then, He demands that Jacob release Him. Jacob replies, "I will not let You go until You bless me" (Genesis 32:26 ESV). The heavenly Wrestler, therefore, pronounces this blessing on Jacob: "Your name will no longer be called Jacob ["deceiver"], but Israel ["God has made right"], because you are right with God and with men you will prevail" (Genesis 32:28). Jacob's nemesis during the night turned into a promise keeper at the break of day. Jacob calls the name of the place Peniel, saying, "I saw God face to face" (Genesis 32:30).

What kind of God would wrestle with Jacob and allow Himself to be defeated by a mere mortal? The same God who allowed Judas to kiss Him, Peter to deny Him, Romans to arrest Him, the Sanhedrin to try Him, Pilate to condemn Him, soldiers to crucify Him, and Pharisees to mock and ridicule Him while He was hanged on a cross.

Thus, in both the OT and NT, this is the God who suffers for His people and gives them grace and mercy.

Jacob saw the woman's Offspring (Genesis 3:15), the wounded Victor, who, in the fullness of time, "came not to be served but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45 ESV). He is the Lion and the Lamb of God, the Root and Offspring of David, and the bright morning star (Revelation 5:5-6; 22:16). The Messenger is God, who appears throughout the OT.

To see God and understand His ways in the OT takes some Jacob-like wrestling—but we're not alone. When Jesus was walking along the road to Emmaus with Cleopas and another man, He brought clarity to the Hebrew Scriptures (Luke 24:13-32). The Savior still illuminates the Hebrew Scriptures, even their strangest sections.

We invite you to wrestle with Israel's Scriptures and the God who gives them. After his wrestling match, Jacob was no longer Jacob—he was Israel. You, too, will be changed as you confront and contend with the OT's most challenging parts. The darkness of the night will yield to the light of a new day, and, just like Jacob, much more will become clear. This book is your Peniel.

Let's get started!

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Growing up, how were you taught to view the OT?
2. How does your church make use of the OT?
3. Take a look at this book's contents. What ideas are you most looking forward to wrestling with?
4. How do you, like Jacob at Peniel, anticipate seeing God more clearly through this study?





CHAPTER 1

WHAT MAKES PORTIONS OF THE OLD TESTAMENT SEEM SO DIFFICULT TO UNDERSTAND?

“[Paul’s letters] contain some things
that are hard to understand.”

(2 Peter 3:16)

Seeing a mountain and being on that mountain are two very different things. From a distance, you can see the mountain's shape, its relation to the surrounding landscape, its height, the tree line, and any clouds on its peaks. However, when you are on the mountain, you can see things that cannot be seen from afar—the change in flora as you ascend the mountain path, the animals that scurry along the ground and the birds that flit among the trees and bushes, the rocky landscape and sandy ridges that seem to pop out of nowhere as you come around a bend in the trail.

In some ways, our view of the OT is like viewing that mountain. We can only see it from a distance—a distance in time, culture, and language that is much greater than even the distance we have between us and the NT. Without specialized training in history and biblical languages, we face a challenge in getting a closer picture of the world of Israel in antiquity and understanding the Scriptures produced by the Hebrew authors. While learning history and languages can aid in getting a better understanding of the OT, even the most knowledgeable scholar will find some features of the text enigmatic and perplexing. Let's explore some reasons for this.

DISTANCE IN TIME AND PLACE

Literature coming from the distant past often contains features that are obscured by the passage of time. People who may have been prominent in their day can be forgotten by later generations. Examples of such persons in the Bible include Belshazzar (Daniel 5) and Pontius Pilate. At one time, there was such a lack of extrabiblical evidence for the existence of these men that some scholars proposed that the biblical authors invented them. Later archaeological

discoveries of ancient inscriptions that mention Belshazzar and Pilate have proved the skeptics mistaken. However, this wrong turn in past biblical studies illustrates how distance in time from antiquity can obscure our knowledge of what the Bible is telling us.

On one hand, time obscures people and events from the past. Thus, it is often noted that there is little or no direct evidence outside the Bible for some very prominent events and persons in the OT, including the exodus from Egypt, the reign of King Saul, or the acts of Queen Esther. That, of course, does not mean that these events did not happen; it simply illustrates that we often have only the biblical writers' testimony to these events and no non-Israelite views with which to compare them. We cannot as easily place these crucial events in a wider context, as we might for persons or events for which we have extrabiblical information. For instance, we have a good amount of ancient historical material concerning Esther's husband, Xerxes, which helps us flesh out his character as we study the book of Esther.

On the other hand, a distant view can also serve to better put events in historical perspective. Some past events have appeared to be very momentous in that generation, but as time passes, those events may seem less significant. Therefore, events that are emphasized in the Scriptures may have held great importance for ancient readers but seem less important to us. For instance, the Israelite defeat of the kings Sihon and Og, who ruled territory east of the Jordan River, is obviously important to the authors of the OT—since it is mentioned nine times in six different books (Numbers 32:33; Deuteronomy 1:4; 29:7; 31:4; Joshua 2:10; 9:10; 1 Kings 4:19; Nehemiah 9:22; Psalm 135:11). Yet Sihon and Og are little known

to many Christians today. The Bible mentions famous wise men in Solomon's day named Ethan the Ezrahite, Heman, Calcol, and Darda (1 Kings 4:31). Since their wisdom is compared to Solomon's, they must have been renowned in their day, and three of them may have been brothers (cf. 1 Chronicles 2:6; Darda in 1 Kings 4:31 is called Dara in 1 Chronicles 2:6). Yet, the Bible mentions Ethan only once more in Psalm 89, which might be an example of his wisdom. Moreover, we have no examples of the wisdom of Calcol or Darda. These men appear to have been important to the writer of the book of Kings, but they are merely a footnote in biblical history to us.

Places, too, can be obscured by time—even by only a few hundred years. How many people today know the location of Columbia, Losantiville, and North Bend, Ohio? They are now Cincinnati. What was Lugdunum in ancient Gaul? It is now Lyon, France. In a few cases, the Bible preserves the earlier names of places. For instance, the city of Dan in northern Israel was earlier called Leshem (Joshua 19:47). However, in other cases, the locations of places mentioned in Scripture are unknown, and sometimes hotly debated, such as the whereabouts of Sodom and Gomorrah or the city of Ai that Joshua and the Israelites destroyed. In a number of cases, it would be helpful to know the exact locations of these otherwise unknown cities to better understand the Bible's stories about them, but the passage of time has—at least for the present—prevented us from knowing.

Therefore, we should not be surprised that at times we struggle to understand the events, people, and places in the OT. Even a place as prominent as Jerusalem, which has been the subject of much archaeological digging for centuries, holds mysteries for us. Some

places mentioned in Scripture to be in Jerusalem are still the subject of much speculation as to their exact location in antiquity.

DISTANCE IN CULTURE

The human culture that surrounds us and through which we interact with others affects us in ways that we often take for granted. Anyone who has traveled to a distant country has learned that other cultures and customs can be quite different from the ones we grew up in or now live in. At least we can inquire about these different present-day cultures and learn about them from living people.

It is not so easy when we encounter the ancient cultures of the OT. The Bible often contains references to customs or cultural assumptions that are quite different from ours. Moreover, while the several cultures of the ancient Middle East shared some features, like in our world today, they varied from place to place and time to time. The customs in ancient Egypt, Babylon, or Persia could be very different from those in Israel.

Israel's belief that there is only one God is something that we share with them and is common in the modern Western world. However, the general assumption among the other nations of antiquity was that there were many gods. Israel was surrounded by such beliefs, and it is not surprising that polytheism was a threat that continually tempted Israel. Therefore, we may shake our heads at how so many Israelites abandoned worship of the true God to worship the multiple gods of the surrounding nations. That is because it is difficult for us to see that there was a certain cultural allure that polytheism held in antiquity, and that made it much easier for Israel to fall into the sin of idolatry involving multiple gods than it is for us.

Other common customs and mores in antiquity may also appear quite foreign to us, especially those involving family and society. For instance, conventions about marriage can be altogether different than ours. One example is the expectation that a man would pay a bride-price to his future father-in-law to receive permission to marry the man's daughter (Genesis 34:12; 1 Samuel 18:25). Jacob, who had few possessions, negotiated a bride-price of seven years of labor to marry Rachel (Genesis 29:18). It is thought that the bride-price was supposed to be held in reserve by the bride's father and used to support her should her husband die. Note that both Rachel and Leah complained that their father had squandered the bride-price Jacob had paid (Genesis 31:14–16).

In some cases, a wife could be called a concubine, a custom that provided marriage for women from the lower strata of society or whose families were poor and needy. Concubines were wives and were sometimes simply called wives. For instance, Jacob's two concubines, Bilhah and Zilpah, are called wives in Genesis 37:2. Concubines, however, were obtained as wives without paying a bride-price, either because they had no living male relatives to demand one or because their family was of such low stature in society that no bride-price could be requested by the woman's family (as in the case of the very poor or slaves).

Inheritances were another custom that could be very different in ancient society. Normally, only sons inherited from their father; sons of concubines and other women to whom a man was not married were not expected to inherit anything unless their father had made provisions for their inheritance. That is why it was not shocking to ancient readers that the judge Jephthah, a son of a concubine, was

exiled from his father's family (Judges 11:1-3), though that seems callous and coldhearted to us. On the other hand, we might miss the impact of Job's act of leaving inheritances to his daughters (Job 42:15). While we might find this expression of love for a daughter commonplace in our day, the original readers of Job would have seen this as an unusually magnanimous gesture. We might also not appreciate the in-your-face boldness of the request brought to Moses by the daughters of Zelophehad that they be allowed to inherit their father's portion of the Promised Land since they had no brothers and it might otherwise be given to more distant male relatives (Numbers 27:1-4).

These are just a few examples of how much distance in culture stands between us and the people of the OT. The writers of Israel's Scriptures often assumed that their ancient audience would understand their customs, norms, and institutions, and often felt no need to clarify them. Rare exceptions of explaining customs that fell out of use can be found (e.g., Ruth 4:7), but more often, the writers expected readers to have internalized the ways of society so that they would need no explanation.

However, we are positioned at quite a distance from the culture of ancient Israel. Our partial knowledge—or even ignorance—of some of the more obscure norms and expectations of society among the people of Israel and the surrounding nations places us at a distinct disadvantage when reading difficult or perplexing passages in the OT. While we can easily understand the major teachings of Moses and the prophets—and there can be no doubt about what the OT teaches concerning the essential doctrines of the Christian faith—there are times when some passages may seem enigmatic

because of our lack of familiarity due to our distance in time from antiquity.

DISTANCE IN LANGUAGE

Another reason we are distant from the OT is language. At times, English and Hebrew can diverge in ways that appear unusual and are unexpected by modern readers. This is even true for readers whose native language is the Hebrew used in the contemporary state of Israel. Ancient Hebrew differs in a number of ways from modern Hebrew. Our human languages are not only a medium of communication but also an expression of our worldview, while simultaneously shaping our understanding of creation. Examples of this are words for colors. Most English speakers have learned to associate colors and their various shades with the visible light spectrum, as can be seen in rainbows. This is often memorized as seven basic colors: red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, and violet. Thus, teal is often described as a greenish blue, and scarlet as a bright red with an orange tinge. Yet ancient peoples did not necessarily view colors by way of the visible spectrum of light. Colors were often viewed by association with the objects that produced them. Hebrew has a word that is often translated “scarlet” (*shani*; see Genesis 38:30; Joshua 2:18, 21). This word occurs at Isaiah 1:18 in tandem with another word for a kind of red color: “Although your sins are like scarlet, they will be as white as snow. Although they are crimson, they will be like wool.” Isaiah uses the words *scarlet* and *crimson* as virtual synonyms. Yet, in English, crimson denotes a purplish shade of red that is distinct from scarlet. How is it that Isaiah sees them as synonymous? The key lies in the fact that both words are derived from the ancient manufacture of natural dyes from organic sources. In

making such dyes, the shade of red could vary from batch to batch, and the color words do not signify a particular nuance of shade but the source of the dye.

A similar example can be found in the Hebrew names for plants and animals. Modern English speakers' words for living organisms are often determined by a Western, scientifically influenced classification that was not part of the worldview of ancient peoples. For instance, Hebrew has a word for large birds of prey: *neshet*. This word occurs twice in Proverbs 30:

The eye that ridicules one's father and despises obedience to one's mother—may ravens of the valley pluck it out and young *vultures* eat it. (Proverbs 30:17)

. . . the way of an *eagle* in the sky, the way of a snake on a rock, the way of a ship at sea, and the way of a man with a virgin. (Proverbs 30:19)

In just the space of three verses, the same Hebrew word is translated both “vulture” and “eagle” in most English versions (because of contextual factors). It is impossible to conceive of an English word that includes both eagles and vultures but not other birds of prey, such as hawks, falcons, and owls. For instance, the English word *raptor* includes both eagles and vultures but also encompasses other birds of prey that the Hebrew word *neshet* does not. For us, vultures and eagles are quite distinct both in appearance and behavior, but the same view of nature was not common among ancient Israelites.

Of course, English and Hebrew are quite different in other ways. In many instances, sentence structure in the two languages can be

dissimilar. In grammar, Hebrew and English differ in a number of ways, including their views of tense (i.e., past, present, and future) and gender (i.e., masculine [he], feminine [she], and neuter [it]). At times, these differences are subtle and of little consequence, but in other instances, the divergence is significant enough to make certain Bible passages appear enigmatic for modern readers. Again, it ought to be emphasized that the plain passages of Scripture are little affected by this, and the OT's doctrine, especially Law and Gospel, are not called into question by our distance in language from the original authors and readers of the OT. For instance, the First Commandment unequivocally forbids all types of idolatry, whether in English or in Hebrew (Exodus 20:3; Deuteronomy 5:7). God as our Savior is the clear teaching of the OT, no matter what language we read the Scriptures in (see 2 Samuel 23:3; Isaiah 43:11; Hosea 13:4).

DISTANCE FROM THE INCARNATION: THE LIGHT OF JESUS ILLUMINATES THE OLD TESTAMENT SHADOWS

The OT contains many items that are made clearer by what we learn about Jesus in the NT. Paul refers to this as the OT's shadow that was being cast by Jesus: "Therefore, don't let anyone judge you with regard to food and drink or in the matter of a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of what was to come. The body of Christ [cast the shadow]" (Colossians 2:16–17). Just as a shadow reveals some information about the object casting the shadow (such as an approximation of its size and shape), so do items in the OT, like those that Paul mentions—laws about food and

drink, religious festivals, the holy days of the monthly new moons, and the weekly Sabbath days. They all reveal things about Jesus, who cast the shadow, but it is obviously easier to understand God's Word in Christ when we can see Jesus Himself rather than His shadow. Yet before Jesus took on human flesh, how were Moses and the prophets to describe the Savior who was yet to come and all the teachings He would make more understandable? They certainly prophesied about Christ in numerous ways so that the people of Israel could have faith in their Savior. (For more on this, see our book *The Messianic Message: Predictions, Patterns, and the Presence of Jesus in the Old Testament*.)

Yet it is difficult to describe in absolutely sharp focus something or someone that has yet to come. Imagine that you climb into a time machine and are transported back in time to see your great-great-grandparents. Suppose you want to describe to them many items and persons that are well known to us but unknown to them: a laptop computer, a mobile phone, the internet, the identity of a prominent world leader, the winner of last year's Super Bowl, or today's popular music. They would have no idea what a computer or the internet is. Most would probably never have used a telephone, much less a mobile phone. Today's world leaders might be quite different from the leaders just a few generations ago. And the Super Bowl would be completely unheard of, as would contemporary jazz, hip-hop, or rock music. Much of what you would try to describe would be by analogy—"these things are like . . ." And yet, no matter how well you describe them, your description would only provide a shadow of things to come in a future your great-great-grandparents would never see.

Thus, when we look back at the OT, we often see the shadows that are made clearer in the NT in the light of Jesus Christ. Even when Jesus was teaching His disciples during His ministry, they sometimes misunderstood because they had not yet seen His suffering, death, and resurrection (see Mark 9:31–32; Luke 2:49–50; 9:44–45; John 12:12–16). This indicates that, in some ways, we understand OT passages *better* than the original readers did. However, it also means that we struggle with the language of analogy and shadow that the OT writers employed because they could not refer to what would later be seen and revealed in the NT—the life and work of Jesus and all the implications of that work, which are so vital to the Christian faith from NT times to now.

While we will attempt in subsequent discussions to shed light on each of these features discussed in this chapter, we ought always to remember that even the most knowledgeable Bible scholar or the most learned theologian will struggle with some parts of the OT, because our knowledge of many of the things that separate us from the OT—including time, place, culture, and language—are only partially known to us. This much, though, is clear: “God’s Word is our great heritage and shall be ours forever. . . . Through life it guides our way, in death it is our stay” (*LSB* 582).

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How does 2 Peter 3:16 not only summarize some of Paul's letters but also parts of the OT?
2. What do you wrestle with the most: OT history, places, culture, or language?
3. The Bible often describes some of God's revelations in Scripture as "mystery." How does a sense of not knowing everything we might like to know about God's Word help us better understand the greatness of God?
4. How does Colossians 2:16–17 help you understand parts of the OT?





CHAPTER 2

WAS THE UNIVERSE REALLY CREATED IN SIX DAYS?

“How many are Your works Yahweh;
in wisdom You have made them all.”

(Psalm 104:24)

“In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth” (Genesis 1:1 ESV). These ten words are some of the most remarkable ever composed. In fact, Genesis 1:1–2:3, the story about how God created the world, ranks as one of the most stirring and majestic passages in all literature. Most striking is God’s use of His spoken word to create. The expression “and God said” appears ten times between Genesis 1:3 and Genesis 1:29. God alone was active in the creation of the world—He didn’t need assistance from anyone or anything. A number of other verses announce this stunning truth (Isaiah 40:26; 41:20; 42:5; 43:7; 45:7–8, 12, 18; cf. Psalm 148:5; Ephesians 3:9; Colossians 1:16).

Genesis 1 presents the six days of creation in a progressive and orderly way with the six days paired in two sets of three:

THE DAYS OF CREATION IN GENESIS 1		
DAY 1 <i>Heavens empty, light created</i>	DAY 2 <i>Expanse of sky separated from sea</i>	DAY 3 <i>Land (dry ground) filled with plants</i>
DAY 4 <i>Heavens filled with sun, moon, and stars to light the sky</i>	DAY 5 <i>Expanse of sky filled with birds; seas filled with creatures</i>	DAY 6 <i>Land filled with animals and people</i>

The narrative of the world’s creation is more than a literary masterpiece; it’s also one of the most hotly debated sections in the OT. Does a six-day creation account match what we know about the age of the universe? Is a Christian who believes in an old universe—say, twelve or thirteen billion years old—true to what Scripture teaches? Does our interpretation of Genesis 1:1–2:3 have an impact on our understanding of the rest of the Bible? And what’s the relationship

between the Bible and science? Are they on equal footing? Or does one have more authority than the other?

Christians have historically argued for a literal interpretation of the OT's creation account. These people are often called creationists. On the other hand, those influenced by Charles Darwin (1809–1882), who wrote *On the Origin of Species* (1859), maintain that Genesis 1:1–2:3 is symbolic, metaphorical, and without any historical veracity. They urge creationists to move on and embrace the science that has proven the Bible's creation story to be irrelevant. Many Christians have rejected macroevolution and defend the historicity of Genesis 1:1–2:3. Before we look closely at these verses, let's get some perspective. What's at stake in this debate?

CREATION AND EVOLUTION COMPARED

The following chart outlines the differences between creationists and Darwinian evolutionists.

CREATION	DARWINIAN EVOLUTION
God created the universe in six days.	The universe began billions of years ago.
God created the world from nothing by His word.	At some time in the distant past, there was nothing. A process known as vacuum fluctuation created what astrophysicists call a singularity. From that singularity, which was about the size of a dime, the universe began to expand.
People have a God-given image and are different from the rest of creation.	People are superior animals.

The purpose of life is to serve God.	The purpose of life is to survive.
People are responsible to God.	People aren't responsible to anyone.
People have infinite value.	People have limited value.
Life has meaning and purpose.	Life has little meaning or purpose.
There is a transcendent, personal God.	God only exists in people's minds.

While these two worldviews compete with one another for people's allegiance, it appears that Darwinian evolution won the day. However, consider this question: What's the probability of taking all the components of a space shuttle, placing them in a massive blender, and pushing the "on" button, then, after a few minutes, pushing the "off" button and presto—we have a perfect space shuttle? This seems highly unlikely, if not completely impossible. Darwinian evolution, though, would have us believe that the universe, infinitely more complex than a space shuttle, appeared out of nowhere—and all by accident.

Here are a few facts regarding the complexity of our world. Scientists estimate that there are between 1 and 10 million species of fungi, bacteria, and microscopic organisms. In addition, they calculate there are 900,000 species of insects; 250,000 species of flowering plants; 4,000 species of freshwater fish; 9,900 species of reptiles; and 4,300 species of mammals. And there are approximately 350,000 species of beetles in the world. To date, experts have identified approximately 1.4 million species of plants, insects, and animals. How many more until they finish? About 8 million more!

And all of this happened by chance? And life is completely random? And there's no Designer behind the design? Despite scientism and evolutionary philosophy, the advances of science—far from disproving that God created all things—demonstrate a deeply complex and amazing universe. The best evidence, however, for a Creator comes in Genesis 1:1–2:3.

THE DAY-AGE POSITION

There are several ways to interpret Genesis 1:1–2:3. We'll look at four of the most common explanations. The first is called the day-age approach. It's an attempt to harmonize the Genesis creation account with Darwinian evolution. This view sets forth several arguments.

First, day-age proponents interpret the Hebrew word for “day” (*yôm*) in Genesis 1:1–2:3 based on Psalm 90:4 (cf. 2 Peter 3:8): “A thousand years in Your eyes are like a day [*yôm*] that is gone by.” When understood this way, “day” in the creation account denotes an era, an epoch, or a long period of time—comparable to a geologic age. Bolstering this interpretation, day-age advocates point out that “day” (*yôm*) in Genesis 1:5 and 2:4 clearly designates periods other than a 24-hour day.

Day-agers further their argument by contending that a gap of time exists between Genesis 1:1 and Genesis 1:2. That is to say, Genesis 1:1 describes God's initial creation, while Genesis 1:2 depicts creation's undoing and downfall. This theory is advanced with a particular translation of Genesis 1:2 that is not found in most English versions: “The earth became without form and void.” Genesis 1:3–31 proceeds to describe creation's restoration after its ruination.

With these arguments in hand, day-age theorists conclude that the biblical account of creation is a metaphor for the evolutionary process. God created the basic natural elements and then let evolution carry out the rest of His work. This position is also called theistic evolution.

How should we respond? First, the six days in Genesis 1 are numbered and have evenings and mornings (Genesis 1:5). It's therefore incorrect to take the poetic expression "A thousand years in Your eyes are like a day [*yôm*] that is gone by" (Psalm 90:4) and conclude that Israelites couldn't differentiate between a figurative use of "day" and a literal use.

Second, the Third Commandment describes creation's six days as parallel to the days of human labor: "Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to Yahweh your God. . . . For in six days Yahweh made the heaven and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day" (Exodus 20:9–11). Because there aren't any gaps between the successive days in the human work week, it's not logical to argue that a long period of time exists between Genesis 1:1 and Genesis 1:2. The phrase "and all that is in them" (Exodus 20:11) further indicates that God didn't make anything after the first six days, and there was no gap between creating "in the beginning" and the "first day"—everything was created in six days!

The day-age interpretation of Genesis 1:1–2 is erroneous for another reason. The universe exists by God's word, not because He defeated chaos shortly after making everything. The depiction of matter as initially "without form and void" (Genesis 1:2 ESV) doesn't describe God's battle over unruly forces. Conflict with

evil doesn't happen at creation. Evil enters the world in Genesis 3, through the wiles of Satan, after creation is finished.

Additionally, the grammatical structure of the Hebrew in Genesis 1:2 indicates that it's circumstantial information. The verse isn't continuing the narrative ideas from Genesis 1:1. The correct translation of Genesis 1:2 is the usual one: "The earth *was* without form and void," not *became*.

THE FRAMEWORK POSITION

Another way people understand Genesis 1:1–2:3 is by means of the framework theory. Just like the day-age scheme, this position also tries to harmonize the Bible's creation story with Darwinian evolution. How? The framework approach argues for a nonchronological view of creation's days. That is to say, the days in creation appear in a logical order, not a chronological one.

Adherents to the framework viewpoint appeal to the literary structure of Genesis 1—the first three days and the last three days are parallel. The "days," the argument contends, aren't twenty-four-hour periods but logical categories.

The reasoning goes like this: The first three "days" summarize creation's universality—light and darkness, water and air, land and vegetation. These are the major spaces in the world. The last three "days" sum up creation's particulars. The sun and moon, fish and birds, animals and people created in "days" four through six fill the spaces God made in "days" one through three.

One problem with the framework theory is a logical one—it holds that the two parallel sets of three days are a literary device

primarily intended to demonstrate God's orderly creation and not intended to depict six actual days. However, this draws a false distinction between the literary aspects of Genesis 1, showing the orderliness of creation, and the text's chronological feature of six days, as if these features cannot coexist in one composition.

In addition, while the framework hypothesis places day one parallel with day four, day two with day five, and day three with day six, there are parallels that cut across these supposedly tight parallelisms. The lights in the sky (day four) are put in the heavens (day two). The sea creatures (day five) are put in the sea (day three). Humans (day six) are to rule the animals (days five and six). Thus, while the general framework of Genesis 1 as being two sets of three days demonstrates the orderly work of God in creation, it does not completely depict how God orders creation.

Those who follow the framework concept read against the plain sense of Genesis 1. It's a story that progresses, not a poem with two parts that symbolize the passing of long periods of time.

THE RELIGION-ONLY POSITION

Still another way to reconcile Genesis 1:1-2:3 with Darwinian evolution goes by the name religion-only theory. This approach suggests that the Genesis account has nothing to do with historical facts. Instead, the verses make two religious assertions: God created the world, and He created it beautifully for human habitation. Genesis 1:1-2:3, therefore, answers two questions: Who made the world? And why was it made? The issues are religious—who and why. Science, on the other hand, asks the historical question—how?

There's no doubt that Genesis 1:1–2:3, for the most part, focuses upon who and why. The passage chiefly makes theological statements. However, it also presents historical truth. The who and the why of creation appear in a story of how, with days, times, and specific details. Genesis 1:1–2:3 thus contains both theology and history, both literary beauty and factual statements. To read the creation account as teaching theology detached from history goes against the grain, assuming that the passage is a parable, a legend, or a myth. Yet what God has joined together—theology and historical claims—man must not separate.

THE YOUNG EARTH POSITION

Let's call the fourth way of looking at the creation account in Genesis the young earth position. This viewpoint doesn't try to reconcile Genesis 1:1–2:3 with Darwinian evolution. Instead, it advocates for a literal reading. Thus, the universe is thousands, not billions, of years old. Young earth proponents come to this conclusion because they believe there are no chronological gaps in Genesis 1:1–2:3—especially not between verses one and two.

What about the ancient fossils? Young earthers adopt what they call the flood geology—that is, the belief that fossil-bearing strata were laid down during the worldwide flood that happened at the time of Noah. Adherents of this belief also maintain that God fashioned the universe as fully functioning. Adam and Eve were created as adults, so the rest of the world was created as fully developed—fossils and all.

Because the genealogies in Genesis 5 and 10 list the age of each ancestor at the birth of his descendant, some young earth advocates

add these numbers together to determine when the world was created—about six thousand years ago. It’s better, however, to understand that these genealogical lists have gaps—they’re selective, not comprehensive. If, in fact, they are all-inclusive, then, when the numbers are added, some who lived before the flood (e.g., Enosh, Kenan, and Methuselah) would have lived during Noah’s era. Yet, we’re told that Noah was the only righteous man of his day (Genesis 6:6–9).

There’s more. Both genealogies in Genesis 5 and 10 list ten generations—as does the genealogy in Ruth 4:18–22. These features, along with extrabiblical genealogies that seldom go beyond ten generations, lead us to believe that the Genesis lists skip generations, making it difficult to gauge the number of years from creation to Abraham.

Thus, while we believe in a young earth that’s thousands of years old, we don’t embrace the idea that the world began on October 23, 4004 BC, as noted by some young earthers. Let’s now consider Genesis 1:1–2:3 in greater detail.

GENESIS 1:1–2

An accurate interpretation of Genesis 1:1–2 doesn’t allow for a gap of time between these verses and the rest of Genesis 1—a position some take to align the OT’s creation account with Darwinian evolution. Any viewpoint that holds that Genesis 1:1 summarizes the creation account and that God begins constructing the cosmos in the next verse also believes that He didn’t make everything out of nothing. Instead, this reading implies God used preexisting matter—a formless and void watery stew (Genesis 1:2).

However, the Hebrew verb translated “create”—appearing six times in Genesis 1:1–2:3—often denotes creating out of nothing. The verb comes forty-five times in the OT and exclusively employs God as its subject. And in every case, God never uses anything to create—although in some cases, He reworks things He previously created (e.g., Psalm 51:12; Isaiah 65:18). Hebrews 11:3 explains it this way: “By faith we understand that the universe was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible” (ESV).

The Bible’s first verse, then, recounts the actual divine act of creating the heavens and the earth—the totality of the universe, everything visible and invisible (cf. Colossians 1:16). Genesis 1:1 describes God’s first act of creating an unformed, unfilled earth and the raw materials He would use to make everything else.

The storyline begins in Genesis 1:1 and continues in Genesis 1:3, when each succeeding sentence begins with “and [God],” then a verb:

- And God said . . . (Genesis 1:3)
- And He saw . . . (Genesis 1:4)
- And He called . . . (Genesis 1:5)

On the other hand, Genesis 1:2 begins with a conjunction and a noun: “And the earth . . .” This verse, therefore, makes a parenthetical statement that depicts the world following God’s inaugural act of creation in Genesis 1:1.

The progression of events is as follows. First, God creates the unformed and unfilled heavens and earth (Genesis 1:1). Next, He begins to speak and bring things into existence. Genesis 1:2

essentially says, “Before we move on, here’s a description of the initial state of the world after God created it and before He announced ‘And let there be light.’” The first day of creation therefore begins in Genesis 1:1 and concludes in Genesis 1:5.

This interpretation rules out the understanding that Genesis 1:1 is a title and that creation begins with the preexisting matter in Genesis 1:2. It also rejects any notion that an indeterminate period exists between Genesis 1:1 and Genesis 1:5—the first day of creation.

DAY AND DAYS

Let’s suppose we overhear someone saying, “Back in the day—1903 to be exact—it took Horatio Jackson and Sewall Crocker sixty-three days to drive coast to coast. They drove during the day.” Though the word “day” has three different meanings in these two sentences, we have no problem understanding them. English speakers intuitively know that the first usage of “day” denotes an era; the second, twenty-four hours; and the third, sunup to sundown. Each of these three meanings is recognizable and common in English parlance. No one would argue that “day” has the same meaning in all three cases.

Welcome to the use of “day” (*yôm*) in Genesis 1–2. It has several different shades of meaning.

The word “day” first appears in Genesis 1:5a: “God called the light Day [*yôm*]” (ESV). Here, the term refers to daylight. It has the same meaning in Genesis 1:14 and 16. In these verses, a day is something less than a twenty-four-hour day, as the context makes clear.

The second time “day” appears in the Genesis creation account is in Genesis 1:5b: “There was evening and there was morning, the first day [*yôm*]” (ESV). This usage denotes a twenty-four-hour day.

A third use of “day” comes in Genesis 2:4: “These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created, in the day [*yôm*] that Yahweh God made the earth and the heavens.” Here, “day” indicates an unspecified amount of time that, in its context, refers to the first six days of creation.

Additionally, throughout Genesis 1:5b–2:3, the Hebrew word *yôm* denotes a twenty-four-hour day. Each of the six days of creation ends with the refrain “evening and morning.” Of course, by asserting a twenty-four-hour day, we don’t mean exactly twenty-four hours. Technically, a day is 23 hours, 56 minutes, and 4.09 seconds. The question at hand is, using everyday language, are the days in Genesis 1 literal days and equal to our days of the week today? The Bible says yes.

Those who want to cling to a semblance of biblical teaching and hold to Darwinian evolution maintain that since *yôm* is used in a non-literal way in Genesis 2:4, this indicates the word is also imprecise throughout Genesis 1. It should therefore not be understood literally. However, this interpretation ignores the fact that in most cases in Genesis 1, “day” (*yôm*) is modified by a number and then followed by the refrain “evening and morning.” Conversely, Genesis 2:4 employs the adverbial expression *beyôm*, which is best rendered “in the day.” This nonliteral use of the word “day” (*yôm*) doesn’t mean all the uses of the word in Genesis 1 are also nonliteral. Neither does it suggest that creationists are inconsistent in their interpretation of “day” (*yôm*) as literal in Genesis 1 but nonliteral in Genesis 2:4.

What about the expression “evening and morning” (Genesis 1:5, 8, 13, 19, 23, 31)? Or “seasons” and “years” (Genesis 1:14)? Throughout Genesis 1, the context requires that we understand these terms as descriptions of time, which is regulated by the movements of the universe. For instance, a year here means a period of roughly 365.2424 normal days and its parts—spring, summer, autumn, winter.

It’s illogical, therefore, to maintain that the chronological terms in Genesis 1 are used in their common sense, denoting ordinary evenings and mornings and seasons and years, but “day” is not. It’s incorrect to suggest that *yôm* in Genesis 1:5b–2:3 means anything other than a single rotation of the earth upon its axis.

GENESIS 1:3

This verse has confused people for millennia. Why does God create light on the first day and the sun on the fourth day? How should we understand that light (Genesis 1:3) and vegetation (Genesis 1:11) appear before the sun (Genesis 1:14–19)?

A compelling interpretation is that God knew people would worship the sun, moon, and stars, so He created light before the heavenly lights to show they aren’t gods. In fact, they’re small and insignificant compared to the Almighty, who creates light without them and makes plants without their assistance. Could it be that the sun’s demotion demeans the worldviews of other ancient Middle Eastern cultures—especially Egypt—where it was worshiped?

GENESIS 1:5

Almost all English translations render the end of Genesis 1:5 with

“the first day.” However, a more accurate rendering would be “one day.” In the remaining six days of creation, the Hebrew employs ordinal numbers (second, third, fourth, etc.). Why does Genesis 1:5 use the cardinal number one rather than “first”? “One day” means one (solar) day, which is how we are to interpret the following six days of creation.

THE SEVENTH DAY

Genesis 2:2–3 states, “On the seventh day [*yôm*] God finished His work that He had done, and He rested on the seventh day [*yôm*] from all His work He had done. God blessed the seventh day [*yôm*] and made it holy, because on it God rested from all His work He had done in creation” (ESV).

These verses are the source of another flash point because some believe divine “rest” is limited to a twenty-four-hour period, while others maintain that rest is ongoing—as stated in Psalm 95:11 and cited in Hebrews 3:11; 4:4; and 4:5. God, therefore, is still resting from His work (cf. Hebrews 4:9–11). However, if the seventh day is open-ended, then each of the six prior days would also be interpreted as open-ended, which is clearly not the case. Each ends with the notice of “an evening and a morning.”

Moreover, Exodus 20:8–11 makes no distinction between the seven days which equal one week. These verses, along with Exodus 31:15–17, are the clearest commentary on Genesis 1:1–2:3 and mitigate all attempts to fit billions of years into Genesis 1—either between Genesis 1:1 and Genesis 1:2 or within the six days.

Additionally, the verses in Psalm 95 and Hebrews 3–4 don't teach that the seventh day continues. God's rest continues, but His creational activities as listed in Genesis 1:1–2:3 have ceased. The seventh day ended after twenty-four hours, just like the first six days—a fact stated twice in Genesis 2:1–2. Divine rest on the seventh day makes it clear that creation is complete.

WHAT'S AT STAKE?

What's at stake in this debate? Everything. If we don't take the days in Genesis 1:5b–2:3 as literal twenty-four-hour units of time, then we open the door for Darwinian evolution, and with it, the belief that for millions of years animals died and some became extinct. Next, we'd have to believe rock layers demonstrate that for hundreds of millions of years, before people were created, there were earthquakes, volcanoes, tsunamis, hurricanes, and typhoons. What do these two positions lead to? The idea that physical death and creational upheavals didn't come as a result of Adam and Eve eating the forbidden fruit. Instead, death and destruction are built into the order of the universe. They've been going on long before our first parents arrived on the scene.

The biblical witness, however, states that God made a perfect world. His flawlessness is celebrated with a seven-fold use of the term "good" (Genesis 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31; cf. 1 Timothy 4:4). Creation was perfect, without strife, conflict, contention, disease, or death. To deny this is to deny the veracity of Adam and Eve's fall into sin (Genesis 3). Christianity sees death as a rude intrusion on life, "the last enemy" (1 Corinthians 15:26 ESV). The Creator didn't make people and animals to die. Death came as a result of sin, as is narrated in Genesis 3.

The central message of the Bible is that Christ Jesus came into the world to abolish “death and [bring] life and immortality to light through the gospel” (2 Timothy 1:10 ESV). The first Adam sinned, and the Second Adam, Jesus (see 1 Corinthians 15:45), was born to atone for the world’s sin. This is what Paul teaches (Romans 8:19–23), and this is why the Father sent His Son—to reverse the curse and reconcile all things to Himself (e.g., Ephesians 1:10; Colossians 1:20). Any evolutionary scheme that includes millions of years of destruction and upheaval before Adam and Eve undercuts biblical teaching regarding the goodness of creation, humankind’s fall into sin, and Christ’s redeeming work.

Furthermore, those who promote Darwinian evolution, with science serving as their king, are unable to embrace biblical miracles. For, in addition to the miracle of a six-day creation, Moses parted the Red Sea (Exodus 14:21–23), the sun stood still (Joshua 10:12–4), Christ was born of a virgin (Matthew 1:18–23), and He died for the sin of the world (John 1:29). And don’t forget the talking donkey, the floating axe head, Joshua and Jericho, David and Goliath, the feeding of the five thousand, Peter’s escape from prison, and—supremely—Christ’s resurrection from the dead, never to die again (Romans 6:9). If a six-day creation is unreasonable, then much of the Bible will appear unreasonable as well. And what’s left of the Christian faith? Nothing.

CONCLUSIONS

The differences between the OT’s creation account and Darwinian evolution are massive. Genesis 1 teaches that creation is Word-based. Macroevolution argues that it’s random-based. The biblical worldview confesses meaning and purpose, beauty and dignity. Evolution

offers chaos and disorder and the survival of the fittest, along with meaninglessness and purposelessness. Either the account in Genesis 1 is a myth, or it is history, albeit history written in a simple way to express profound truths. There is no middle ground. We take our stand with the OT. “Praise to the Lord, the Almighty, the King of creation!” (LSB 790:1). In doing so, we’re not against science but only against scientific philosophies that try to eliminate God from creation, deny His existence, and attack the veracity of His Word.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How does Psalm 104:24 summarize this chapter?
2. What have you been taught about the origins of the world?
3. When have you felt a tension between faith and evolutionary science?
4. What strikes you most regarding the differences between Darwinian evolution and the creation account in Genesis?
5. What have you learned about Genesis 1:1–2:3 regarding the meaning of the word *day*?
6. What might you say to someone who believes in Darwinian evolution?

