

Worldview Conversion: Science, the Bible and Faith

In *“The Trinity, Creation and Pastoral Ministry,”* Graham Buxton notes that church leaders and teachers need “a more sympathetic engagement with those in the scientific community in order to combat the (sometimes substantial) residual prejudice in the minds of many Christians against the contribution of the natural sciences to an understanding of what it means to live as human beings in God’s world” (p. xv). In the article below, GCI Elder Santiago Lange asks and answers a related question: *Can science, the Bible and faith be reconciled, or are they hopelessly at odds?*



Santiago Lange

Defining the issue

Some Christians feel that to uphold Scripture, they must reject many of the claims of science (particularly ones related to origins and the age of the earth). Conversely, many non-Christians (and some Christians) believe that to uphold modern science, they must reject at least some of what they understand Scripture to say. Is there no possibility of reconciling science and Scripture; science and Christian faith? Let’s see what we learn when we address this topic through the lens of a Christ-centered worldview.

Dealing with our preconceptions

Let’s begin by noting that both sides in the science vs. faith debate tend to bring to the table preconceptions concerning both science and Scripture that flow from the particular worldview they hold. Some Christians bring preconceptions rooted in what we might call a fundamentalist Christian worldview—one that tends to see science (evolution in particular) as hopelessly God-rejecting. On the other side, some scientists come to the table with a philosophical commitment to a materialistic-naturalistic worldview that sees the Bible as primitive and anti-science. This latter group tends to view the first 11 chapters of Genesis with particular skepticism, even derision.

Using an exegetical method in reading Scripture

Thinking with the mind of Christ, let’s lay aside our preconceptions as best we can, and go to Scripture to see what it says, using an method of reading the Bible that is advocated by many conservative Bible scholars, including John H. Walton, Professor of Old Testament at Wheaton College.



John H. Walton

Dr. Walton warns against bringing false notions (preconceptions) to our reading of the Bible (the Old Testament, in particular). He notes that though the Old Testament was written *for* all humankind in all eras, it was written specifically *to* Israel, not to us. He explains the implications of this understanding: *[The Old Testament] is God’s revelation of himself to Israel and secondarily through Israel to everyone else. As obvious as this is, we must be aware of the implications of that simple statement. Since it was written to Israel, it is in a language that most of us do not understand, and therefore it requires translation. But the language is not the only aspect that needs to be translated. Language assumes a culture, operates in a culture, serves a culture, and is designed to*

communicate into the framework of a culture. Consequently, when we read a text written in another language and addressed to another culture, we must translate the culture as well as the language if we hope to understand the text fully. (The Lost World of Genesis One, p. 7)

Like most conservative Christians, Walton embraces the exegetical principle that a passage of Scripture can never mean something it did not mean to the original author/audience. This principle is grounded in the understanding that God works through authorized human vessels, and we must be careful to not interpret biblical texts on the basis of private interpretations grounded in contemporary experience. To rightly understand Scripture, it is vital that we understand the particular text's *context*. Walton illustrates this point by saying that when we read the Old Testament we are in a way reading "someone else's mail." Though the authors of the New Testament interpreted Old Testament passages in fresh ways, they did so uniquely, having been given God's authority to do so. Walton comments:

Biblical authority is tied inseparably to the author's intention. God vested his authority in a human author, so we must consider what the human author intended to communicate if we want to understand God's message. Two voices speak, but the human author is our doorway into the room of God's meaning and message. That means that when we read Genesis, we are reading an ancient document and should begin by using only the assumptions that would be appropriate for the ancient world. We must understand how the ancients thought and what ideas underlay their communication. (Walton, p. 15)

Genesis 1:1 says that "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." This has rightly been called one of the most profound statements ever made. It sparks our curiosity regarding some fundamental questions. However, as Walton asserts, the Bible is not a textbook on science. Instead, it is a book about redemption, emphasizing the concept of *Immanuel* (God with us). Walton recounts the primary flow of Scripture—starting in Eden, continuing to the Tabernacle, then the Temple, on to the Incarnation, then Pentecost, and finally the new heaven and new earth.

In this progression, Immanuel theology becomes clear. God's presence, which Walton defines as "sacred space," is to be guarded, maintained and expanded by the human race as bearers of God's image. This is humankind's appointed priestly role, with Adam and Eve serving as archetypes for humanity. God's plan of redemption declares the way out of a disrupted, disordered and alienated world. The supreme concern within God's heart in giving us the Holy Scriptures is that we might understand what goes on in the human spirit, affecting everything we do, and that we might understand God's great desire to dwell with us in relationship.

Understanding ancient cosmology

Walton also emphasizes that the creation accounts in Genesis are embedded within the cultural background of ancient cosmology. Genesis does not describe cosmology in modern terms, nor does it address modern scientific questions. Instead, God gave his message to Israel within its context, which included the accepted cosmology of that era. Walton writes, *Through the entire Bible, there is not a single instance in which God revealed to Israel a science beyond their own culture. No passage offers a scientific perspective that was not common to the Old-World science of antiquity. By the way, there is no concept of a "natural" world in ancient Near Eastern thinking. The dichotomy between natural and supernatural is a relatively recent one. (Walton, pp. 14-17)*

Understanding the cultural context and worldview of those who wrote the Old Testament leads to a more accurate understanding of its message. Walton comments:

The Bible's message must not be subjected to cultural imperialism. Its message transcends the culture in which it originated, but the form in which the message was imbedded was fully permeated by the ancient culture. This was God's design and we ignore it at our peril. Sound interpretation proceeds from the belief that the divine and human authors were competent communicators and that we can therefore comprehend their communication. (Walton, pp. 19–20)

How old is the earth?

A primary question that arises in reading Genesis has to do with the age of the earth. “Old earth” proponents understand it to be some 5 billion years old—an understanding based on physical evidence derived from scientific observation. “Young earth” proponents understand it to be 6,000-10,000 years old, inferring that understanding from statements in Genesis. But this is only an inference, for as Walton notes, Genesis does not state the age of the earth—it simply refers to “In the beginning”—a period of time, not a particular point in time.

According to Walton, the creation accounts in Genesis are not about material origins (though he does acknowledge that God created the cosmos out of nothing), but about God setting up functions and order out of pre-existing matter on earth. This understanding fits with the ancient Near Eastern cosmology embraced by much of the world (including Israel) at the time God communicated these accounts to Israel through Moses. Thus to read into Genesis chapter 1 a discussion regarding the age of the earth is, in Walton's view, a “category fallacy.”

Two complementary facts

Genesis begins with two great and complementary facts. The first is the existence of an ordered universe (“The heavens and the earth,” Gen. 1:1). That fact, made known by *observation*, is linked with a second fact, made known by *revelation*: the existence of a God who has a plan of redemption and wants to make his home with us.

What meaning do these two facts have for Christians? Two things: 1) nature is designed to teach us certain facts about a supreme, divine Being, and 2) divine revelation is designed to lead us to the very God about whom both nature (observable facts) and Scripture (revealed facts) testify. These two books—the book of God's *works* and the book of God's *words*—properly understood, are complementary in that they complete one another. As Walton notes, there is no real war between science and Scripture.

The ancient cosmology in the Old Testament

Walton identifies several passages in the Old Testament (including the creation accounts) that reflect the ancient cosmology that forms the basis for how creation is described throughout the Bible. The diagram below illustrates that cosmology.

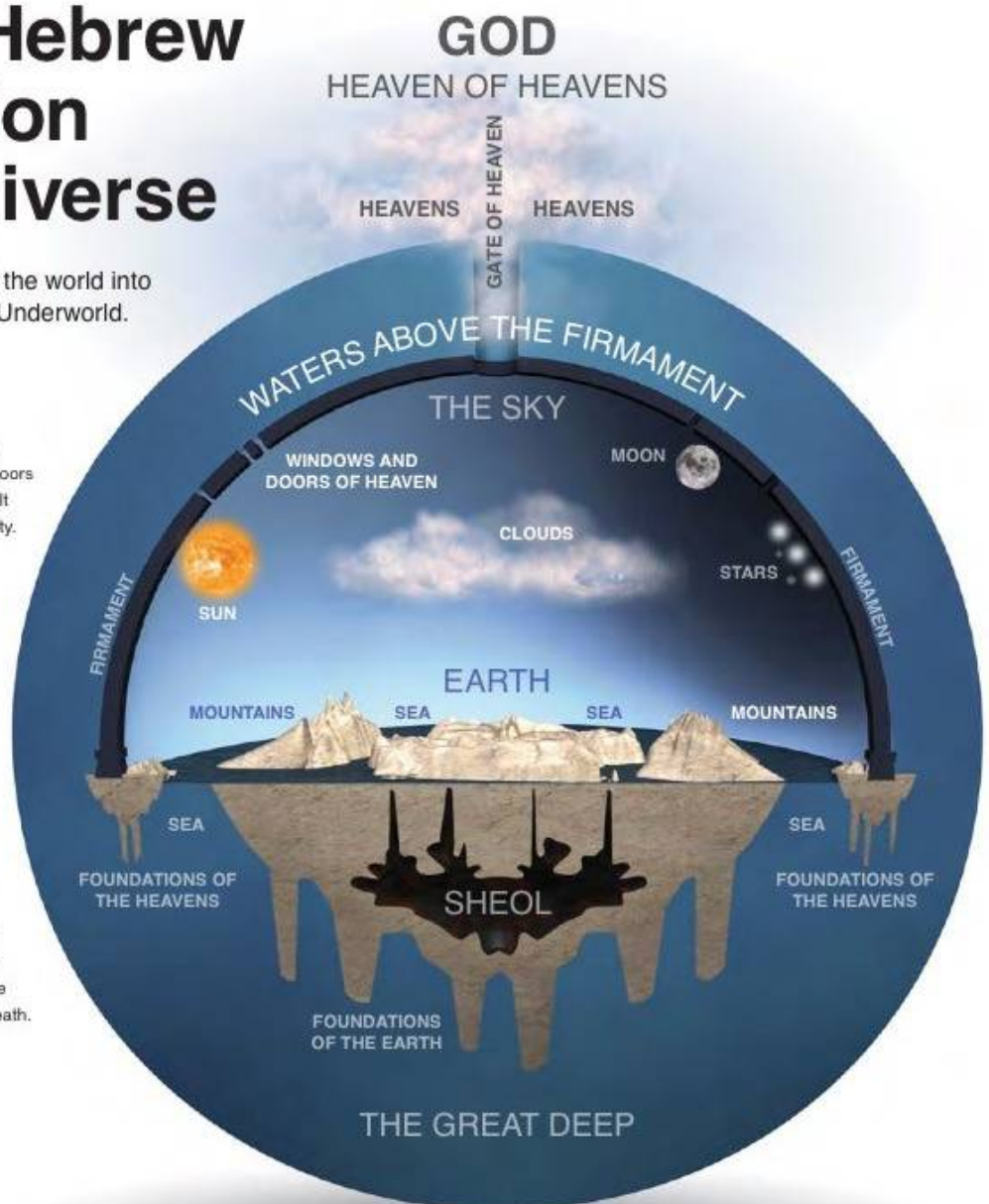
Ancient Hebrew Conception of the Universe

The ancient Israelites divided the world into Heaven, Earth, Sea, and the Underworld.

They viewed the sky as a vault resting on foundations—perhaps mountains—with doors and windows that let in the rain. God dwelt above the sky, hidden in cloud and majesty.

The world was viewed as a disk floating on the waters, secured or moored by pillars. The earth was the only known domain—the realm beyond it was considered unknowable.

The Underworld (Sheol) was a watery or dusty prison from which no one returned. Regarded as a physical place beneath the earth, it could be reached only through death.



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The firmament

God said, "Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters, and let it divide the waters from the waters." And God made the firmament and divided the waters which were under the firmament from the waters which were above the firmament: and it was so. And God called the firmament Heaven. And the evening and the morning were the second day. (Gen. 1:6-8, KJV)

In a similar way to the idea of the *firmament* (seen in the diagram above and sometimes called the *vault* or *expanse*), day two addresses the regulation of earth's climate. Ancient Near Eastern cultures viewed the cosmos as featuring a three-tiered structure: the heavens, the earth, and the underworld. Climate originated from the heavens, and the firmament was seen as the mechanism that regulated moisture and sunlight. Though in the ancient world the firmament was generally viewed as more solid than we would understand it today, it is not the physical composition that is important, but the function. In the *Babylonian Creation Epic*, the goddess

representing this cosmic ocean is divided in half by the god Morduch to make the waters above and the waters below.

The water cycle

He draws up the drops of water, which distil as rain to the streams. (Job 36:27)

Though some modern interpreters have attempted to read this verse as a scientific description of the condensation-evaporation cycle, the context is clearly operating from a different perspective (e.g. Job 36:32, where God fills his hands with lightning bolts that he throws like spears). The two verbs in this verse speak of a process of drawing out or refining (as precious metals would be drawn out in a refining process). It was believed in the ancient Near East that raindrops came from a heavenly stream or ocean, a great body of water that enveloped the earth, and from subterranean waters. Thus, there were waters above and below the earth. It was these waters from which God is seen as drawing out raindrops.

The circle of the earth

He sits enthroned above the circle of the earth, and its people are like grasshoppers. He stretches out the heavens like a canopy, and spreads them out like a tent to live in. (Isa. 40:22)

The picture of the universe described here is the common cosmological view of the ancient Near East. As shown in the diagram above, the sky was a dome that arched over the disk of the earth, which sat on top of a primeval ocean. Under the ocean was the netherworld (*sheol*), virtually a mirror image of the space above the earth. Thus, the entire universe was an enormous sphere, cut in the center by the earth. Nevertheless, in Isaiah 40, the earth itself is described as circular. In Babylonian literature, Shamash is praised as the one who suspends from the heavens the circle of the lands. Likewise, in a prayer to Shamash and Adad, Adad causes it to rain on the circle of the earth. The circle simply reflects the curvature of the horizon, thus disk-shaped, rather than spherical (for which Hebrew uses another word). In the ancient world, the earth was consistently regarded as being circular.

Then went up Moses, and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel: And they saw the God of Israel: and there was under his feet as it were a paved work of a sapphire stone, and as it were the body of heaven in his clearness. (Ex. 24:10, KJV)

Some first-millennium Mesopotamian texts speak of three heavens with each level of heaven described as having a particular type of stone as its pavement. The middle level is said to be paved with saggilmud stone, which has the appearance of lapis-lazuli (NIV, sapphire in the KJV). This was believed to give the sky its blue color. The middle heavens were where most of the gods lived.

Heart/mind

“This is the covenant that I will make with the people of Israel after that time,” declares the Lord. “I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people.” (Jer. 31:33)

There is no Hebrew word for brain, and neither the Israelites nor any of the other ancient peoples knew what the brain was for. Egyptian priests who in mummifying bodies carefully preserved all the important internal organs, discarded the brain. For the ancients, the heart was the seat of both emotions and intellect.

Conclusion

Though this article has only scratched the surface of a large topic, hopefully what we've looked at here will help us all to take another look at both science and Scripture, recognizing that neither one of them (rightly understood) is in conflict with the other. If you'd like to read more about this important topic, see the suggested resources below.

Suggested for further study:

For a list of books by John Walton, see at https://www.amazon.com/stores/John-H.-Walton/author/B001IGOV8C?ref=ap_rdr&store_ref=ap_rdr&isDramIntegrated=true&shopping-PortalEnabled=true

For a podcast from Scot McKnight titled *Reconciling Science and Scripture*, <https://churchleaders.com/podcast/311689-scot-mcknight-reconciling-science-scripture.html>

For various resources see the Biologos website at <https://biologos.org>

Here is a lecture from John Walton on Christian options for reconciling Scripture and science (including the science of evolution): (on YouTube at <https://youtu.be/JwvFR3uPBM8>)

Here is a lecture from Dan Rogers titled "Understanding Biblical Imagery in Order to Better Understand the Bible": (on YouTube at <https://youtu.be/meCr2y3HFU>)