

# Science and Bible Interpretations

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## Introduction

Many people seem to want to treat the Bible as a historical document. Some denominations do consider all the text to be historically (and scientifically) accurate as written, and many do not, including—especially—Judaism, which has a long tradition of biblical scholarship dedicated to understanding the messages and lessons the Bible holds. And, the Old Testament (as we Christians call it) is THEIR book, after all, so why would we not listen to them about how to understand its meaning?

The two of us are from different Christian denominations with different doctrinal principles in place, but we share a doctrine about biblical teaching. The Bible is useful and instructive as a history of Salvation: a history of God and the people who believe in Him. It is less useful as a history of the world because the historical information in it relates primarily to the journey of the people of God on the pathway to Salvation so includes only the people and places that make up the steps on that journey. As a result, the historical events, people, and

places that have no part in this journey are not included in the text, even though we have ample evidence that they existed.

The differences among denominations regarding the Bible's value as a historical document is a doctrinal disagreement. In a sense, it is a matter of interpretation: how should believers understand and use this scripture? Therefore, arguing about specifics in the text will not resolve these differences. Instead, the conversation—if there is going to be one—has to be about the role that we accept the Bible to have in guiding us in the faith.

As far as cosmology, geology, biology, or any natural science is concerned, biblical texts reflect the state of human knowledge in these fields as it existed thousands of years ago. We have learned—by the grace of the intelligence with which we are endowed—a lot about the universe and a whole range of research disciplines that was unknown to the ancients. To have put information about the speed of light or the true nature of the stars and galaxies into the Bible would have been confusing to the people who were reading it. And the worst possible result of this confusion would be to obscure the message of Salvation.

## **Common Quotes**

If biblical text about diet, nutrition, health and disease, geology, cosmology or any of the sciences contradicts what modern research in the natural sciences has learned, there are those whose position is that the Bible should always be accepted over human knowledge. People who take this position look to

the Bible for confirmation. To make their case, they often rely on two particular quotes.

The first quotation comes from 2 Timothy 3:16: "*All scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction and training in righteousness.*" But this is "training in righteousness" and not "training in science." And this reference to that part of Scripture that Christians call the Old Testament reinforces the position we take here: the best way to view the Scripture is to understand its message in terms of the pathway to Salvation.

This message is clear in verse 15: "*...from a child thou hast known the holy scriptures, which are able to make thee **wise unto salvation through faith** ...*" (emphasis added).

The second quotation comes from: 1 Timothy 6:20-21:

<sup>20</sup> *O Timothy, keep that which is committed to thy trust, avoiding profane and vain babblings, and oppositions of science falsely so called*

<sup>21</sup> *Which some professing have erred concerning the faith.*

But the use of the word "science" is not our modern understanding of the term as a discipline of study of the natural world. This is why all fifteen of the *modern* (20th century and later) English translations available at the Blue Letter Bible website (<https://www.blueletterbible.org/>) use the term "knowledge" instead of "science" in this passage. The two that use the word "science"—the King James and Webster Bibles—were translations made before the middle of the 19th century.

We can see the roots of this usage from the first letter to Timothy as it appears in the Vulgate (which was commissioned near the end of the 4th century):

*“O Timothee depositum custodi devitans profanas vocum novitates et oppositiones falsi nominis scientiae.”*

The understanding of the word “scientia” originally in Latin is more along the lines of knowledge or understanding generally, or skills and aptitudes, or the practice of a discipline. A good example is the motto on the crest of Harvard University: *Virtus et Scientia: Virtue and Knowledge*. When Latin is used in *modern* texts, “scientia” *can* mean “science” as we understand it today, depending on the context. But this is not how it was commonly understood in the 5th century when the Vulgate went into “production”.

Remember that the letters to Timothy were addressed to congregations in Greece by the Apostle Paul who died around 65 CE. Therefore, the text of these verses in the Greek New Testament (composed by early in the 2nd century) are relevant.

*“ὦ Τιμόθεε τὴν παραθήκην φύλαξον ἐκτρεπόμενος τὰς βεβήλους κενοφωνίας καὶ ἀντιθέσεις τῆς ψευδωνύμου γνώσεως.”*

*O Timothy, keep the tradition, diverting the abominations of gossip and contradictions of pseudo-knowledge.”*

A more literal translation would be “so-called knowledge” or “falsely called knowledge” which is how the New King James translation glosses it. “*ψευδωνύμου*” is where we get our word “pseudonym”—literally a “false name.”

Because this version predated the Vulgate by about 2 centuries, we must consider the Greek passage to be closer to the original.

The upshot is that readers of Bible translations must be careful of translations that find correspondences between words but do not capture the understanding of the people who wrote, read, and heard these words at the time in which they lived. This is the problem of translation generally, of course: a good translation captures the meaning and context, not just the words.

Why is using “science” in the translation wrong? It is because the sciences, as we know them today, did not exist at all before about the 16th century, and they did not coalesce into a set of disciplines that we recognize today as scientific disciplines until the 18th and 19th centuries. Even the word “scientist” as we understand it today did not exist before William Whewell coined it and applied it to the disciplines that study the natural world in 1833 (though it did not come into general use for some time after that; what we would call scientists today were commonly known up through the end of the 19th century as “natural philosophers”—that is partly why our advanced degrees even in most fields of science still read “Doctor of Philosophy” today).

The use of the word “science” is a poor translation of the original Greek wording and because the Latin translation gives us a similar word (*scientia*), we are led to a common mistake made by translators: that words that have the same roots and similar forms (for example, science and *scientia*) must have the same meanings.

In essence, the passage means to be suspicious of "fake news" (or "fake knowledge"). And relying on translations that use the word "science" as understood in our modern usage of the word are, in fact, *changing* the meaning of the biblical texts to mean something that they did not mean when they were written.

It is simply incorrect to try to match words written (in any document) before the existence of our modern understanding of the natural sciences to the modern meanings of these words. So, the quotation from 1 Timothy 6:20-21 that is used to subjugate the sciences to the Scripture is incorrectly applied to natural sciences, and some readers of the Bible are trying to make it imply something that the epistle writer would not have intended.

## **A Belief That Should Be Considered**

Yet, if we believe that God is the author of the universe, then all the laws of nature that we have discovered are the laws that are derived from the universe as originally created. Gravity is a great example. It is not mentioned at all in the Bible (there is only an obliquely reference in Matthew 4 (drawing on Psalm 91), when Jesus is tempted in the desert with the statement that jumping from the height of the Temple should cause him to fall to Earth, except that angels would prevent the impact).

The biblical passage doesn't tell us much more than "things dropped from any height will fall to the ground." But the absence of any more detail does not mean that the mathematical formulae for laws and actions about the effects of gravity are not real or correct.

The fact is that the Bible was never meant to be a textbook of history, science, or medicine (what would you do if you came down with leprosy? Leviticus 13 is quite clear about this. And even Jesus followed that rule when he cured the lepers, as recounted in all the Gospels as he told them to go show themselves to the priest in the Temple).

So, if readers of this article want to have a discussion about what the best role is for the Bible as we seek Salvation, then that might be a productive conversation. But otherwise, a discussion that tries to shoehorn all of natural science into the biblical accounts of biblical creation is probably not a conversation worth having. The issue is about whether the account in Genesis is a real historical account or an allegorical one is a theological problem, and the differences in how we approach this and other parts of the creation narrative are doctrinal. It is simply not something that is within the scope of the natural sciences.

The oral tradition of the creation story shared by ancient Jews and their ancestors was meant to teach them their relationship to God and their place in the universe, and NOT to record a specific series of historical events. We can tell this in two ways.

**First**, that there are 2 different accounts in Genesis that record the events of the Creation in different sequences. Taken in light of the ways in which creation narratives in various cultures work to inform people of their place in Nature and their relationships to their deities, the lesson is more important than the details, and we know that the details and sequences of events

are different, even though the essential message is the same (with different emphases and nuances).

**Second**, the lyrical form of the text reflects an oral tradition because the format makes the information easier to remember and re-tell. For example, we see the phrases "And God said" or "And the Lord God made..." and "God saw that it was good" and "And the evening and the morning were" and so on. This is typical of the sorts of structures that we see in oral traditions that peoples all over the world use to make their narratives easier to remember and recite.

But the most important message in these Scriptures is about the relationships among God, Nature, and people. Viewed in this way, any later scientific (or other) discoveries and knowledge that did not belong to ancient peoples 6,000 or more years in the past can co-exist and are not laid "against" each other.

This is why leprosy and gravity are two examples of things we know now that the ancients did not. It does not go "against God's biblical creation" to study and formulate scientifically how gravity works (or how floods form and act on the surface of the Earth) any more that it is against God's word that to go to a physician and receive an antibiotic for leprosy instead of going to a priest in the temple. But it is not so easy to reconcile even the 2 creation narratives in Genesis, if one must accept that these both record literal historical events.

In the first narrative, there are all the physical aspects of the Creation: first light and darkness, then firmament and waters and land. The next event brought grasses, herbs, and trees. Then the lights in the firmament (to give us night vs day). THEN things



living in the waters and things that fly in the air. THEN beasts of the earth, cattle and things that creep, and finally humans: both male and female together.

In the second narrative, Gen 2:4 specifically says "in the day that the Lord God made the earth and the heavens" (so NOT over the six days in Gen 1?) Then plants and herbs are created, but do not grow because they are not watered (though in Gen 1 water was created before the plants). Then Adam appears (though in Gen 1 Adam came AFTER all the other living things); then trees (which apparently are different from plants of the field). Then beasts of the field, fowl of the air; and then the creation of Eve.

These sequences do not match, and therefore, IF one claims that they are HISTORICAL (that is, a record of events), then they must match in the major outline (though minor details can vary because the emphasis and context of the passages differ; for example, we can argue realistically that there is a doctrinal or theologic point for mentioning trees separate from the other plants in Gen 2 because of the role that the Tree of Knowledge will have in the Salvation story).

The point in the above does not challenge the validity of the Scripture as a spiritual guide and a history of Salvation; only as a literal historical document in all regards. Taken in light of the ways in which creation narratives in various cultures work to inform people of their place in Nature and their relationships to their deities, the lesson is more important than the details.

We both agree that the importance of what is said in the Bible (including Genesis) is to tell us about the relationship of God to the Universe and to his people, and as a guide to the history of and pathway to Salvation. Having an Earth that is 4.5 billion years old instead of 6,000 years old does not impair that

relationship or interfere with that pathway. Just as seeking antibiotic treatment for leprosy does not impair that relationship or interfere with that pathway.

We agree that the *specific* words that we read in the Bible are not transmitted directly from the Holy Spirit in specific human language so much as they are meant to be inspirations by the actions of the Spirit in humans. The scripture 1 Timothy 6:20-21 is a prime example.

## Other Viewpoints

There are some people in organizations that promote young-Earth creationism (YEC) (such organization are **Answers in Genesis, Genesis Apologetics, Institute for Creation Research, and Creation Ministries International**) that want to make what is written in the Bible fit the universe and Earth as being 6000 years old and that Noah's flood was worldwide and deposited the sedimentary layers in the Grand Canyon. What leaders of these organizations do is select data that seem to fit an age of 6000 years and a worldwide flood and ignore data that do not. That is, they select "false or fake knowledge or so-called knowledge," which is what Timothy warned against. On that basis, Collins has written numerous articles that refute what they claim. The following link to a document titled "Resources" provides the names of articles and their links for the reader to access that provides correct science interpretations. No YEC leader has responded with evidence to show that Collins has made any science errors. See: [Nr122Resources5.pdf \(csun.edu\)](#)

## Still Other Viewpoints

Other people, like the YEC, also want to make the Bible have words that correlate with modern science. These include what is written in the following books and articles.

**Genesis versus Science: An amazing agreement** by Michael Issigonis

**The Bible and Science – The Relationship between Science and Christianity** by Sixpert Sanawa and Matabazi Placide

**What kinds of science is found in the Bible?** by Terry Defoe

**How does the biblical story of creation and science fit together?** by John Lennox

**Science and the Bible: Are they incompatible?”** by Ernest C. Lucas

The above six are only a few of many that are written regarding this subject in which the authors want to make the Bible into a science textbook. Instead, we say that it is written to be a book of good theology to give guidance in regard to spiritual matters.

## **Conclusion**

Readers of this article need to understand that the Bible is written to be a book of excellent theology and not to be a science textbook. It needs to be read with wisdom and with the recognition that it was written in the context of a time and culture of about 6000 years ago. In writing this article neither of us finds that 6000-year-old scriptures present accurate accounts of the natural world around us and how it works.

What is known today is a more modern understanding and is the basis for medicine, agriculture, engineering, navigation, weather forecasting, transportation, energy production, communication, and so on....such that we have more and better tools for stewardship of the Earth and feeding the Lord's sheep (figuratively and literally).

The foundations of these technologies and special skills are absent from the Scriptures. But that does not detract from the main purpose of the Scripture: to show the relationship between God and his people, and how that relationship grew and developed over time, as well as the story of the (often rocky) journey of humankind on the road to Salvation.

In writing this article we are among a majority of scientists who accept the Gospel and the history of salvation that is in the Bible, and who recognize at the same time that the sciences can do as Jesus commanded us: to care for the poor, the ill, the imprisoned (and those disadvantaged in so many different ways) AND to spread the Word.