

A lot of people assume that the Bible says that the earth is 5000 years old, evolution is false, and somehow it supports a geocentric worldview and something happened with Galileo or something but the story is hazy. And the conclusion from that is Christianity is unscientific and ought to be rejected out of hand.

This often boils down to criticism levied at the very first chapter of the whole Bible: Genesis 1. Doesn't it contradict what we know about the universe, about the origin of species, about the plain and simple truth? I would argue not: rather, the issue is that the genre of Genesis 1 is often misidentified. It's not supposed to be a science textbook, but a poetic prologue setting up some foundational truths about the identity of God in a way that was understandable for ancient people. Imagine if instead of the current text of Genesis 1, we had the following instead¹:

And God said...

$$\oint \vec{E} \cdot d\vec{s} = \frac{Q}{\epsilon_0}$$

$$\oint \vec{B} \cdot d\vec{s} = 0$$

$$\oint \vec{E} \cdot d\vec{l} = - \oint \frac{\partial \vec{B}}{\partial t}$$

$$\oint H \cdot d\vec{l} = i + \epsilon \frac{\partial \vec{B}}{\partial t}$$

...and there was light.

That might be more useful for characterizing and predicting the behavior of electromagnetic radiation, but it would do a very bad job of conveying to ancient peoples the relevant truths about God and the universe.

Before we get to there, we will illustrate some ways to view poetry by looking at one particular poem from Robert Frost²:

¹ I.e. Maxwell's equations for the description of electromagnetism (i.e. light).

² Nothing Gold Can Stay, Robert Frost, retrieved from <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/148652/nothing-gold-can-stay-5c095cc5ab679> on 2/3/2020

Nature's first green is gold,
Her hardest hue to hold.
Her early leaf's a flower;
But only so an hour.
Then leaf subsides to leaf.
So Eden sank to grief,
So dawn goes down to day.
Nothing gold can stay.

This poem is rich with metaphor and is identifiable as poetry through the meter and rhyme. If I were to start nitpicking this poem for inaccurate generalizations about horticulture, by, for example, complaining that not all plants have the initial golden hue that Frost is referring to, I would be missing the point. Let's say, for the sake of argument, that the Garden of Eden in the poem is referencing a completely mythological document: should I then discard this for its lack of historical rigor? Similarly, it would be really strange to criticize Frost for saying that "dawn goes down to day" when the sun clearly rises from the horizon, and that furthermore talking about the sun's movement in the sky relative to earth strongly implies a geocentric solar model. That has nothing to do with the deeper truth of the poem: namely, the beauty and color of the morning sunrise are but a fleeting moment for the day, much like that golden hue first referenced. The poet takes certain liberties with the scientific details to convey a much more significant, personally affecting truth: namely, that all things, maybe even especially beautiful things, are temporary- it is the human condition to experience the beauty and sublimity of the world as fleeting.

If Genesis 1 is poetry, how would we identify it as such? And if it is poetry, what are those deeper truths that are more important than the scientific details? The text of the chapter is repeated here for the sake of convenience:

1 In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. **2** The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.

3 And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. **4** And God saw that the light was good. And God separated the light from the darkness. **5** God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

6 And God said, "Let there be an expanse in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters." **7** And God made the expanse and

separated the waters that were under the expanse from the waters that were above the expanse. And it was so. **8** And God called the expanse Heaven. And there was evening and there was morning, the second day.

9 And God said, "Let the waters under the heavens be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear." And it was so. **10** God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas. And God saw that it was good.

11 And God said, "Let the earth sprout vegetation, plants yielding seed, and fruit trees bearing fruit in which is their seed, each according to its kind, on the earth." And it was so. **12** The earth brought forth vegetation, plants yielding seed according to their own kinds, and trees bearing fruit in which is their seed, each according to its kind. And God saw that it was good. **13** And there was evening and there was morning, the third day.

14 And God said, "Let there be lights in the expanse of the heavens to separate the day from the night. And let them be for signs and for seasons, and for days and years, **15** and let them be lights in the expanse of the heavens to give light upon the earth." And it was so. **16** And God made the two great lights—the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night—and the stars. **17** And God set them in the expanse of the heavens to give light on the earth, **18** to rule over the day and over the night, and to separate the light from the darkness. And God saw that it was good. **19** And there was evening and there was morning, the fourth day.

20 And God said, "Let the waters swarm with swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the expanse of the heavens." **21** So God created the great sea creatures and every living creature that moves, with which the waters swarm, according to their kinds, and every winged bird according to its kind. And God saw that it was good. **22** And God blessed them, saying, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let

birds multiply on the earth.” 23 And there was evening and there was morning, the fifth day.

24 And God said, “Let the earth bring forth living creatures according to their kinds—livestock and creeping things and beasts of the earth according to their kinds.” And it was so. 25 And God made the beasts of the earth according to their kinds and the livestock according to their kinds, and everything that creeps on the ground according to its kind. And God saw that it was good.

26 Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.”

27 So God created man in his own image,

in the image of God he created him;

male and female he created them.

28 And God blessed them. And God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.” 29 And God said, “Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit. You shall have them for food. 30 And to every beast of the earth and to every bird of the heavens and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.” And it was so. 31 And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

How is it that we identify this as poetry? And if we identify this section as poetry, what's to prevent me from saying the whole Bible is meant to be understood as poetry (or whenever I want to get out of a sticky science contradicting situation)? The answer is that you just have to look at it. In the same way that Nothing Gold Can Stay has some key features (the meter and rhyme scheme) that indicate how to read it, Genesis 1 has features that distinguish it from the normal prose we encounter in the rest of the book- namely, the very strong parallel structure and intentionally restrained diction. Moreover, you may also notice that there are "days" in the chapter (from which 7 day Creationists get their young earth), but the "evenings and mornings" exist before the sun or the moon exist! This led even ancient expositors (such as Origen, Augustine of Hippo, and Justin Martyr) to conclude that Genesis 1 was not meant to be taken literally. Also, if you read ahead to the very beginning of chapter 2 (which is most likely still part of the poem- the modern chapter divisions are not actually related to the original text) you may notice that the 7th day does not have the "evening and morning" framing that the other days do. This led figurative interpreters to believe that "day" actually refers to something like "age," and the seventh day is the current time (that is, God not actively creating stuff).

So if there are enough clues to indicate that this is supposed to be poetry, then what is that deeper truth that the text is supposed to indicate? To get there, we will examine a few of the poetic devices.

First, in v.1: "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth." The phrase "Heavens and the earth" is a poetic device called a merism, which indicates totality by positing the opposite extremes (in English we have a few of these: like saying "I searched the house from top to bottom"). The point is not that God made "two things" but rather everything- all things had their start in God. When physicists up to the early 20th century still assumed that the universe was eternal, this verse seemed preposterous. And then came the Big Bang theory which indicates a definite beginning with near certainty (oops! Awkward). Robert Jastrow, former chair of multiple NASA programs and self-professed agnostic, nevertheless had this to say:

For the scientist who has lived by his faith in the power of reason, the story ends like a bad dream. He has scaled the mountains of ignorance; he is about to conquer the highest peak; as he pulls himself over the final rock, he is greeted by a band of theologians who have been sitting there for centuries.³

The other major theme is an understanding of God's creative action: God says... and it was so. God's creative action is to divide things- separating light from darkness, waters above from waters below, and then water from dry ground, via spoken command. Within those commanded divisions, flourishing occurs, along with an evaluation: "it was good". There is an overarching structure to the verses where days 1, 2, and 3 establish bounded domains while days 4, 5 and 6 populate them.

³ God and the Astronomers, Robert Jastrow, Norton, 1978

Boundaries	Created things
DAY 1 v.3-5 Light and Darkness	DAY 4 v.14-19 Sun, moon, and stars
DAY 2 v.6-8 Water above and water below (sky)	DAY 5 v.20-23 Sea creatures, birds
DAY 3 v.9-10 Dry ground; vegetation ⁴	DAY 6 v.24-27 bugs, land animals, humans

This pattern is only interrupted for the creation of mankind, very intentionally, to note the special significance for humanity in contrast to the rest of the universe. You might also notice that there's a special evaluation at this point: "it was very good" in contrast with "it was good." The point of this is that the Bible is affirming that the rest of the creation story was leading up to mankind. Humanity is created "in the image of God" and then given a special mission other than just populating the earth. In the Biblical view, the difference between humans and other animals is a spiritual, transcendent reality that defies any characterization by physical traits or abilities. While that can sound kind of strange, it also happens to be the one explanation that properly values human life: why is a human's life worth more than an animal's? Why is a poor person, or a dumb person, or a disabled person "worth" just as much as a healthy person? There is a sanctity and transcendent value to every human life that defies material characterization, which is the very thing that this Genesis chapter proclaims. There is a need for more than just creature comforts and animal survival as well, which is another thing that this chapter is explaining- and that fulfillment is found in a God given purpose and mission.

We will end this section with one more quote from Robert Jastrow:

Now we see how the astronomical evidence supports the Biblical view of the origin of the world. The details differ, but the essential elements in the astronomical and Biblical accounts of Genesis are the same: the chain of events leading to man commenced suddenly and sharply at a definite moment in time, in a flash of light and energy.⁵

⁴ Ok, so how does vegetation fit within the parallel structure? There's an item being created in the wrong place. One possible answer is that the "specialness" of vegetation emerging from the earth ought to be associated with the "human" emerging from among the animals.

⁵ The Enchanted Loom, Robert Jastrow, Simon & Schuster, 1983