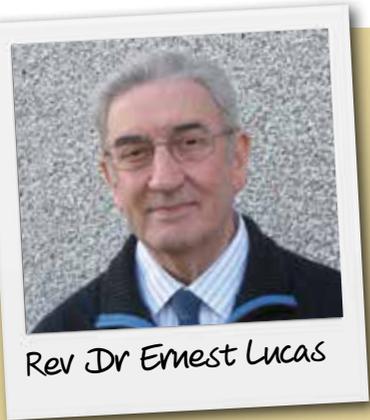


Genesis does not teach us science. It teaches us that there is one God who created everything that exists. It is a planned and ordered creation which is fit for the purpose He intended. Humans have a special place in that purpose as

the only creatures made in God's image. That brings a special responsibility, to look after and develop the world, not as we want to, but in accordance with God's purpose and reflecting something of God's character as loving, wise and just.



Rev Dr Ernest Lucas

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Further information

www.cis.org.uk – Christians in Science

Suggested reading

Lucas, E. C. Can we believe Genesis today? The Bible and the questions of science, Leicester: IVP, 2005.

Walton, J. H. The Lost World of Genesis One: ancient Cosmology and the Origins Debate, Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009.

THINKING
ABOUT...

how we interpret Genesis

What does it mean to read
the Bible responsibly?

ADDRESSING QUESTIONS OF SCIENCE AND FAITH



THINKING ABOUT...

how we interpret Genesis

Rev Dr Ernest Lucas

Interpreting the Bible properly means doing it thoughtfully and carefully

'I guess it's alright for you to interpret the Bible' the man said to the preacher, 'But I do just what it says'.

Jesus said that if your hand or foot causes you to sin you should cut it off, or if your eye causes you to sin you should pluck it out (Matt 18:8-9). I don't know any Christians who 'do just what Jesus said'. 'Of course not' you might respond, 'Jesus was using a figure of speech to make the point that we should take serious action to avoid things that lead us to sin'. I agree, but in saying that you are saying that we should do what we think the Bible means not 'just what it says'. That is the responsible way to read the Bible, and to do that we must interpret it.

Interpreting the Bible properly means doing it thoughtfully and carefully. When reading any particular passage we need to ask some basic questions: What kind of language is this? What kind of literature is this passage? For whom was it written? What is its purpose? What information from outside the passage might be relevant to understanding it? Whenever we

read anything we usually deal with these questions sub-consciously. When reading the Bible it's good to make the process a deliberate one. This is especially important since the Bible was written millennia ago and comes from a cultural and historical situation very different from ours. We may misinterpret it if we simply assume that we can read it as if it was a type of literature we know today.

Down the centuries many Christian scholars have concluded that when the Bible speaks about the physical world it uses the language of the ordinary person and that this is 'the language of appearance'. It describes the world as it appears to be. So, it speaks of the sun rising and crossing the heavens, not the earth rotating. The earth is said to be fixed on unmoving foundations. Moreover, in the Bible God 'accommodates' himself to the view of the world that the ordinary people of that time had. This is because God's purpose was not to teach them what we would call 'science' but to teach important theological truths.

Consider Genesis 1:6-8. Here we read that God created a 'firmament' to separate the waters above it from those below it. The translators of the King James Authorised Version chose that word because they knew that the Hebrew

HOW CAN WE SET ABOUT INTERPRETING THE BIBLE PROPERLY?

word they were translating means something solid, something firm. In fact it implies a solid dome (see the Good News Bible translation), which is what it appears to be. Job 37:18 shows that the Hebrews thought of the sky as being like solid metal. In the Old Testament rain is said to come from 'windows' in heavens (Gen 7:11). In Genesis 1:6-8 God is assuring the Hebrews, in terms which they would understand, that he created the weather system and so is in control of it.

Since very early times both Jewish and Christian scholars have noted the oddity that in Genesis 1 there are three 'days' with evening and morning, yet the Sun and Moon aren't created until the fourth day. This led them to conclude that the account is a figurative one, not some kind of 'historical' account. It depicts God as a worker doing a good week's work creating the cosmos as a kind of building. At the start it is 'shapeless and empty' (v2). During the first three days God 'shapes' it by acts of separation. During the next three days he 'fills' the 'shapes' with appropriate creatures. In this pictorial way we are assured that we live in a planned and ordered creation which is suitable for

us. The Hebrew word translated as 'good' means 'fit for purpose'. The pattern of six days work and then a day of rest, sets a pattern for how we should work.

It is significant that Genesis 1:16 does not name the Sun and Moon. This is because the peoples around the Hebrews worshipped them as gods and so their names referred to these gods. Such ideas are rejected by calling them 'lights', using a word that means something self-luminous, like an oil lamp. If there was any intention to give a 'scientific' description the moon should have been called a 'mirror', not a 'light'. Again, the purpose is theological, rejecting what in modern times has become horoscopic astrology.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO READ THE BIBLE RESPONSIBLY?

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THE CREATION ACCOUNT IN GENESIS?

