

CHAPTER FIVE

THE CREATED UNIVERSE

THE MOST FAMOUS BIBLICAL DESCRIPTION OF CREATION APPEARS AT the very beginning of the Bible. The first chapter of Genesis describes the stages of creation. The account begins with the straightforward declaration by God: "Let there be light." With light comes the first day which is composed of darkness and light, evening and morning. The day begins with darkness and ends with light. Light and time appear together as the beginning of creation.

This opening creation account makes dramatic assertions, but it does not bother with explanations. It does not explain where darkness came from. Does darkness exist in the same way that light exists, or is darkness the absence of anything? This account of creation also raises the issue of the meaning of time. Does time exist? If so, what is it? We tend to define time in terms of events. Time is how long it takes a person to die. Time measures the speed at which the earth rotates. Time measures the speed at which the earth travels around the sun. The earth rotates one time per day. The earth travels around the sun one time per year. My car travels sixty-five miles per hour on the highway. Time is a physical measurement just as a mile is a physical measurement. Science views time as a physical quality just as space is a physical quality. In reading the biblical account of creation, however, one must decide if science should determine the meaning of Scripture or if something else should.

One of the greatest conflicts between science and biblical faith in the modern era involves the understanding of the origin of the *cosmos*, or the universe. The conflict revolves around how long it took for the universe to develop in its present form and how long ago the whole thing began. At one time science concerned itself only with *cosmology*, or the study of the universe as it is. In more recent years, however, physicists have turned to the

issue of *cosmogony*, or the study of the beginning of the universe. After taking the lead in the acceptance by the scientific community of the Big Bang theory for the origin of the universe, Stephen Hawking has backed away from the idea of a beginning of the universe because of the tremendous religious implications of the theory. Once the theory has been stated, one still has not answered the cause of the Big Bang or what came before the Big Bang.

The Bible begins by addressing the question of the origin of the universe with the simple statement, "In *the* beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen. 1:1 KJV). This declaration represents the fundamental presupposition of the Bible as well as the faiths of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. It makes a statement about what kind of God exists as well as what kind of universe exists and the universe's relationship to God. In this translation taken from the King James Version of 1611, the translators have added a word that does not appear in the Hebrew text. Instead of the literal translation "in beginning," the scholars added a word in order to say "in the beginning." What difference does it make? The translators interpreted the Hebrew text according to their worldview or philosophy. They have limited the possible understandings of the Bible by deciding that it means a particular point in time: *the* beginning.

The question of when something happens poses a major issue for science. It represents a major aspect of scientific observation. It represents a critical aspect of measurement. In the Bible, however, when something happens rarely has as much significance as *that* something happens or *why* something happens. Jesus remained vague in his answers to "when" questions. His disciples asked him when the end of the age would come (Matt. 24:3; Mark 13:4; Luke 21:7). He replied with an explanation of what the end would be like for all concerned and an exhortation about how his followers should behave, but he made it quite clear that God had not revealed and would not reveal when the end would come.

One of the greatest problems of faith arises when well-meaning people insert ideas in the text which God has not revealed. Theology tends to speculate in a way that makes the Bible conform to a current cultural understanding of the world. The speculations always proceed with the best of intentions as Eve did in the garden when quizzed by the serpent about eating from the tree of knowledge: good and evil. God had said not to eat it, but Eve added that

they were not to eat it *or touch it*. Theology tends to try its best to improve on revelation or make it acceptable.

During the modern era, theologians and scientists have attempted to interpret the creation account of Genesis 1 in terms of the prevailing science. By and large, theologians of both a conservative and liberal stripe accepted the view that science deals with “real” truth; therefore, the Bible must be made to say what science says, or science must be made to say what the Bible says. The conservative Scofield Reference Bible (1909), developed to present the “scientific” study of the Bible, imposes in its notes a major catastrophe in creation between Genesis 1:1 and 1:2 which came as a result of divine judgment. Nineteenth-century liberalism blossomed into a neo-orthodoxy in the twentieth century which regarded the Bible as a collection of stories which bore witness to faith but only as a record of personal religious experiences. This approach avoids the conflict with the prevailing scientific explanations of origins by retreating from the idea of the Bible as revelation.

Preliminary Considerations

From a scientific perspective, the text of Genesis 1 poses some major difficulties. Many of these difficulties, however, arise from imposing a twentieth-century worldview on the text. The order of creation presents one set of problems for someone with a modern mind-set. Genesis 1:1 states that “in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” The text then goes on to say that heaven was not created until day two and earth was not created until day three. If the earth was not created until day three, how could it be “without form, and void” before day one? If “the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters” before day one, then when were the waters created? Did something exist before the beginning? These questions arise in order to put the text in a scientific framework. The modern mind has a need to conform the Bible to a scientific framework, because in the modern era real truth is scientific truth.

Biblical faith assumes that something existed before the physical universe, and that the something which existed is God, who created the physical universe. God is either physical or metaphysical. Some religious approaches and philosophical approaches would identify God with the physical processes of nature. The Bible makes numerous statements about the metaphysical or spiritual nature of God. Jesus declared emphatically that “God is spirit” (John 4:24). The Bible is silent on how the spiritual realm came to

be. The spiritual realm is as much a result of creation as the physical realm, but the Bible says virtually nothing about it compared with the elaborations on the creation of the physical world. Part of the problem of understanding the meaning of the creation account of Genesis 1 arises over the difficulty of understanding time from a spiritual perspective.

Not until the twentieth century has science begun to understand time from a biblical perspective. The understanding has begun to come as a result of the work of the Jewish physicist, Albert Einstein. Perhaps it is only a coincidence, but it was a Jew who gave a scientific formulation to a Hebrew view of time. According to Einstein, time belongs to the physical world as much as space does. Time is affected by gravity as much as any other physical thing. At the speed of light, time stretches out to eternity. Time is not a fixed matter but a relative matter.

The ancient Hebrew mind-set had a similar view of time, but without the scientific formulation. This understanding of time related to farming and fishing. When is the right time to plant crops? When conditions are right. It may be May 1 one year and April 15 the next. When is the right time to harvest crops? When the crops are ripe. It may be October 1 one year and September 24 the next. This understanding of time is called *chairos* time. It has to do with appropriateness and quality of time. *Chairos* has to do with "the fullness of time." It cannot be measured. It is not equal. It is not sequential. It is unique.

The ancient Greeks developed a new understanding of time based on the effort to measure and quantify. The most primitive of peoples had observed the seasons and established calendars based on observations of the sun, moon, and stars. The Hebrews kept a calendar and observed such festivals as the Passover accordingly. The Greeks, however, advanced the notion of a mechanical understanding of time measured chronologically in equal measure. This understanding of time is called *chronos* time.

If I say, "I stayed at the party for two hours," I have made a statement about *chronos* time. If I say, "I had a good time at the party," I have made a statement about *chairos* time. Any consideration of the meaning of Genesis 1 must determine whether it deals with *chronos* time or with *chairos* time, physical time or spiritual time, scientific time or theological time.

Likewise, one must decide if the light and darkness referred to in Genesis 1:2–5 are physical or metaphysical. In the sequence of creation given in Genesis 1, light comes first. Light sources, however, do not come into creation until day four. Do day one and day four refer to the same kind of light? Throughout the Bible, “light” refers to a spiritual situation as well as to a physical situation. Proverbs 8:22–30 suggests that God first created wisdom. Is wisdom alive, or does the Bible use metaphors to express sublime ideas? The description of the creation of light comes immediately after a description of the context in which the light appeared: “And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters” (Gen. 1:2 KJV). The light seems to address the situation. The Hebrew expression *tohu wavohu*, which has been translated “without form and void,” refers to a condition of emptiness or chaos. If the light of Genesis 1:3 refers to the same spiritual quality as Proverbs 8:22, then light means that God founded the universe on the basis of order in contrast to chaos. If the light of Genesis 1:3 refers to the physical light of Genesis 1:14, then its creation merely makes the chaos visible.

The identification of light as a spiritual quality in creation appears in the Gospel of John. In his introduction, John described the relationship between God and the physical universe by saying that God made everything. Without discussing any other aspect of creation, he explained that light comes from the life of God and withstands darkness. Furthermore, he explained that “the true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world” (John 1:9). Later in John’s Gospel, Jesus declared, “I am the light of the world” (John 8:12). The meaning of “light” in these texts suggests that the Bible frequently uses normal aspects of sensory experience to describe a spiritual reality. Books of the Bible written centuries apart regularly use *light* to describe a spiritual situation as the familiar psalm says: “Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path” (Ps. 119:105 KJV). Any effort to understand Genesis 1 must involve the determination of whether *light* refers to a physical or a spiritual situation, a scientific or a theological idea.

The Meaning of Day

Many modern people dismiss the Bible as a collection of folk-tales because it teaches that God created the universe in six solar days. Many modern Christians have rejected modern science because it

teaches that the universe is fifteen billion years old. Both the scientific person and the religious person, in this context, have adopted the same understanding of the meaning of “day” in the first chapter of Genesis. The religious person may have rejected the scientific reading of the universe, but they have accepted the scientific reading of the Bible. Science understands a day to mean a consistent, measurable period of twenty-four hours, each determined by the time it takes for the earth to rotate on its axis. Metaphorical, metaphorical, or spiritual understandings of “day” do not have the validity of a “literal” scientific day, even for modern religious people. They have accepted the cultural view of the superiority of scientific knowledge over any other kind of knowledge.

The Bible, however, means several things by the term *day*. Even when speaking of a period of time related to the rising and setting of the sun, the ancient Hebrew worldview did not mean what a modern scientific view of day would mean. Perhaps the most famous example of this difference relates to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Jesus predicted he would be “three days and three nights in the heart of the earth” (Matt. 12:40). The Gospels and the Epistles teach that Jesus was buried on Friday and rose again on the third day, which was Sunday. If a day is twenty-four hours, then three days would be seventy-two hours. Jesus died Friday afternoon about three o’clock (Luke 23:44–46). They rushed his body to a nearby tomb in order to bury him before the beginning of the Sabbath at about six o’clock. Seventy-two hours later would be late Monday afternoon. What happened to the missing time?

In the Hebrew understanding of time, with their respect for wholeness and completeness, any portion of a day counted as a day. On Friday Jesus lay in the tomb for no more than two hours, but probably less than one hour, but it counted for all of Friday. Saturday began at sundown on Friday and continued until sundown on Saturday, a full twenty-four hour period. Sunday began at sundown on Saturday. The women went to the tomb the next morning very early while it was still dark—at the most twelve hours later—only to find the tomb empty (John 20:1–2). Jesus could have risen any time after sundown on Saturday and it would have been the third day. In terms of solar hours, thirty-eight hours at most had passed, but in terms of Hebrew thought, three days had passed.

In the modern era, people have tended to interpret Scripture like a mathematical equation. Interpretation became a matter of finding the formula. In the equation $x + x + x = y$, one could easily find the value of y if they knew the value of x . This approach, however, assumes that x always equals x . But what happens if x does not equal x ? In the example of the resurrection, $x = 2$ hours, $x = 24$ hours, and $x = 12$ hours. The Bible is neither a math formula to be calculated nor a riddle to be solved. Concerning the death and resurrection of Jesus $x =$ a day, but x does not equal 24 hours. A day plus a day plus a day equals three days. If we say that a day equals twenty-four hours, then we get the wrong answer.

The problem of time and its meaning increases at each end of creation: the beginning and the end. Revelation refers to periods of time during which the final events of the cosmos will occur. It teaches that Christ will reign on earth for a thousand years (Rev. 20:1–6). The Gentiles will trample the holy city for forty-two months and the Lord's two witnesses will prophesy for 1,260 days (Rev. 11:2–3). The witnesses will be killed and their bodies thrown in the street for three and one-half days (Rev. 11:7, 9, 11). Upon the opening of the seventh seal, there will be silence in heaven for about half an hour (Rev. 8:1). Upon the opening of the sixth seal, the day of the wrath of God will come. The woman fleeing the dragon finds shelter in the desert for 1,260 days (Rev. 12:6). She is taken care of for "a time, times and half a time" (Rev. 12:14). The Beast holds sway for forty-two months (Rev. 13:5). Ten kings will receive power for one hour (Rev. 17:12). For centuries people have tried to assign a value to the different periods of time without success. The meaning of time may be different in each situation! Biblical interpreters have given wrong interpretations to Revelation because they tend to apply a number of unspoken assumptions to the Bible related to how people measure and experience the passage of time.

If one considers Genesis 1 to be revelation from God rather than merely human reflection about God, one must ask if the creation account comes from a human perspective or a divine perspective. If God views creation from a human perspective, then the concept of "day" could reasonably be understood to mean twenty-four hours. If Genesis 1 reflects a divine perspective, however, then one must consider God's experience of time and what a "day" means to God.

The Bible makes passing reference in several places to how God experiences time. Peter made the observation, "But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day" (2 Pet. 3:8). It sounds like another mathematical formula. From the perspective of the modern person who sees everything in equal, quantifiable terms, the temptation is to substitute one thousand years for one day, which would make the first seven days of Genesis 1 equal to seven thousand years. Does this approach give us the "real" meaning of time for God? Again, the modern person who relies upon a scientific understanding of truth is tempted to conclude that either 2 Peter is true scientifically or not true at all.

Another passing reference to God's experience of time, however, also appears in the Psalms. A psalm attributed to Moses observes of God, "For a thousand years in your sight are like a day that has just gone by, or like a watch in the night" (Ps. 90:4). On the surface, it seems like another mathematical formula that allows a simple substitution of one thousand years per solar day. Yet, the statement says "like" rather than "is." How long is "a day that has just gone by"? How long is yesterday? Something that has already happened has no duration. Something that has already passed cannot be measured. And what is "a watch in the night" like? The Hebrews knew nothing of dividing time into hours. The two smallest divisions of time were day and night. In this psalm, a thousand years for God *is like* the smallest unit of time after it has already happened. This is not a formula, but it sounds like a riddle. Something that has already happened does not have duration any more. After yesterday is over, it does not exist.

The New Testament world had adopted the Greek habit of dividing days into hours, but Peter was not speaking in a formula any more than the psalm did. He also spoke in a circular riddle: a day is like a thousand years, a thousand years is like a day, which is like a thousand years, which is like a day. Any attempt at a formula here would result in an infinite mathematical equation. Einstein predicted that at the speed of light space would collapse and time would stretch out to eternity. These two biblical passages are not explaining the theory of relativity, but they share with Einstein a concept of time that goes beyond the old modern view. Time exists only as an aspect of physical space. God is not subject to time any more than he is to physical space. God is aware of

physical space, and as such, he is aware of time as well. But the Creator does not experience time and space as aspects of creation in the way that creatures do.

The Timing of Creation

Relating the sequence of creation in Genesis 1 to a scientific view of the origins of the universe poses quite a problem with its sequence of six days. Modern science regards the formation of the universe to have taken billions of years. Critics and defenders of the Bible tend to share the same modern understanding of time in reading the text: The days represent six, twenty-four-hour solar days in consecutive order. The English translations of the Hebrew text support this reading, because the translators share the same assumptions. A literal reading of the Hebrew text, however, raises some interesting options on what kinds of science it will allow.

Hebrew verbs do not have a past, present, or future tense. The Hebrew mind was not concerned so much with when an action took place as with the quality of the action. Most children operate on this basis. I can ask my daughter if she cleaned her room. She may answer, "Yes." When I inspect the room and find it a mess, she will reply, "Give me time! I'm going to finish it." Hebrew verbs reflect such things as completed action or incomplete action. In the Hebrew perfect tense, action is viewed as complete even if it does not end until the future. The imperfect tense indicates an action which may have begun in the past but which has no specific ending point. The word translated "created" in Genesis 1:1 belongs to that tense of completed action but not necessarily past action. The passage begins by declaring the completeness of God's creation, even though it has not happened yet at that point in the text.

The first specifically described act of creation comes with the light in Genesis 1:3. God does not say, "Be light," which would be a command. Instead, he says, "Let there be light," which is in the *voluntative* form. The voluntative represents an exercise of the will. God willed that the light should come into being. The English translation fails to convey something else interesting about how God said it. The verbs for "said" and "be" are *imperfect*, which means the action began, but it does not end. In other words, a literal reading of the text might be, "And then God *began* to say, 'Let there *begin* to be light.'" This literal reading would suggest that God began something which he has not stopped and that the light is upheld by his word.¹

For every new thing God does in creation, Genesis uses this same grammatical form. God says to let something begin to happen, but the action does not end. This form describes the appearance of light (v. 3), the firmament (v. 6), dry land and the seas (vv. 9–10), vegetation (v. 11), celestial bodies (v. 14), water and air creatures (v. 20), and land creatures (v. 24). This form even appears with the making of people (vv. 26–27). A literal reading suggests that God began a creative activity which he has not stopped doing.

English translations also reflect the modern worldview in how they describe the seven days of creation. Following the Greek model of sequential, measured time, the days are referred to as *the* first day, *the* second day, and so on through the seven days. For the first five days, however, the Hebrew text does not contain the definite article “the.” Instead, it literally says “one day” for the appearance of light. For the appearance of the firmament the text reads “*a* second day” rather than “*the* second day.” The text also speaks of *a* third day, *a* fourth day, and *a* fifth day instead of *the* third day, *the* fourth day, and *the* fifth day. In other words, the text does not refer to the acts of creation as occurring on consecutive days. Any amount of time could come between the days of creation. The days refer to particular phases of creation, but not to the timing. The world is completed in seven days, but not in one week!

The conclusion of the Genesis 1 account of creation makes the point most clearly about the continual creative activity of God. After the six days of creation, the account declares literally that “the heavens and the earth *were being finished intensively*” (Gen. 2:1, author’s emphasis). The verb pattern changes from the simple indicative to the *intensive*, but at the end of the six days, creation is not finished. On the seventh day, however, the text literally says that “God *began to finish intensively* his work which he had done and he began to rest on the seventh day from all his work which he had done” (Gen. 2:2). The completion of creation occurs only when God stops, which is the meaning of the Hebrew word *sabbath*.

The Genesis 1 account begins by declaring that God created (completed action) the heavens and the earth. It then describes the variety of phases of creation, emphasizing that God began each phase and continued to call it forth. This account then ends by declaring: “These are the generations of the heavens and of the earth when they were created, in the day that the LORD God made

the earth and the heavens” (Gen. 2:4 KJV). This statement concludes the first account of creation and forms the bridge to the second account of creation. Yet, next to each other in this statement occur two different concepts of time. The “generations” of heaven and earth when they were created suggests vast spans of time. Then, the text reduces creation to one day. In its totality, creation represents a single, completed act of God.

Other Biblical Creation Accounts

In most of the accounts of creation found in the Bible, the question of time never arises. Modern people tend to ignore the other accounts of creation when thinking about what the Bible says on the subject. The other accounts do not contradict Genesis 1, but they do provide a basis for understanding the point and meaning of Genesis 1.

The Bible was written over a period of centuries in a context of many cultures and worldviews. A few of these cultures include Canaanite, Egyptian, Babylonian, Persian, Hebrew, and Hellenistic. Revelation always has a cultural context in which the people who receive the revelation live. Every culture has a worldview through which it understands the physical world. At no point does God require a people to change their worldview before receiving a revelation, though the revelation they receive inevitably leads to a change of worldview. Worldview includes whatever passes for science in a culture, even the most primitive of cultures. The Bible does not teach any particular science so much as it speaks to people in a way that their understanding of the world (science) can receive.

Psalm 104

Psalm 104 contains an account of creation as lengthy as that in Genesis 1, and it involves the same acts of creation. Though the psalm describes the universe God has created, the psalm is about God. The description merely serves to show the worthiness of God for praise: “Praise the LORD, O my soul. O LORD my God, you are very great; you are clothed with splendor and majesty” (Ps. 104:1).

The psalm then begins to explain why God is very great. First, “He wraps himself in light as with a garment; he stretches out the heavens like a tent and lays the beams of his upper chambers on their waters” (Ps. 104:2–3a). Once again, light appears as a prelude to the creation of the physical order. With what kind of light does God clothe himself? Again, the creation of sun and moon do

not appear until quite far along (vv. 19–23). Again, the heavens appear out of the waters before the earth. Instead of a “firmament,” which is a beaten brass vessel like a turkey cover, as in Genesis 1, God uses great beams to separate the waters.

Once again, God separates the waters below so that the earth appears. Instead of water covering the whole earth, God sets boundaries for the water. Just as the heavens are set on beams, the earth rests on foundations so that it can never be moved. Does this mean that the earth does not move around the sun? Or does it mean something else?

This psalm says much more about God than Genesis 1 in terms of its descriptions of creation. Here, God clothes himself in light, uses clouds as a chariot, and “rides on the wings of the wind” (vv. 2–3). God is described as having hands and a face (vv. 28–29). Does this psalm mean that God literally wears clothes, travels from place to place on a cloud for transportation, and has a physical face and hands? The ancient Greeks, Egyptians, Babylonians, Canaanites, and Philistines believed so. Or does the psalm mean something else about God? Are these statements metaphors to help people understand the wonder of how God creates?

Psalm 33

In Psalm 33 the creation of all things again forms the basis for praising God. This psalm does not give the same lengthy description of creation, nor does it expound on the breadth of creation. It does focus, however, on how God created: “By the word of the LORD were the heavens made; their starry host by the breath of his mouth” (Ps. 33:6). Again he separates the waters from the dry land, but without a firmament or beams or foundations. Instead he simply “gathers the waters of the sea into jars” (Ps. 33:7) or into a “heap” (KJV). Creation appears as effortless activity: “For he spoke, and it came to be; he commanded, and it stood firm” (Ps. 33:9).

While this psalm speaks of creation and shares the same features of creation as the other creation accounts examined, the point of the psalm lies elsewhere. The psalm focuses on the idea that God has a plan and a purpose for all of creation: “But the plans of the LORD stand firm forever, the purposes of his heart through all generations” (Ps. 33:11). The rest of the psalm discusses how the plan and purpose of God affect people. Life has meaning and purpose because a God exists who created all things with purpose in mind.

Psalm 19

Psalm 19 begins with a dramatic statement about the heavens: “The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament showeth his handiwork. Day unto day uttereth speech, and night unto night showeth knowledge” (Ps. 19:1–2 KJV). Creation itself tells us something about God. He made it in such a way that it gives reliable testimony about him. The same idea appears in Psalm 50: “The heavens proclaim his righteousness, for God himself is judge” (Ps. 50:6). Combining the righteousness of God with the testimony of the heavens suggests that God does not lie through what his creation declares. Chapter 2 of this book discussed the idea of revelation and God’s ability to communicate as a personal being. The Bible represents a collection of specific revelations to individuals, but creation itself represents general revelation to all people. God does not lie in specific or general revelation. When a conflict appears between general revelation and specific revelation, someone has misinterpreted either creation or the Bible.

This psalm makes the clear declaration that God has “pitched a tent for the sun” in the heavens and that the sun “rises at one end of the heavens and makes its circuit to the other” (Ps. 19:4b, 6a). This statement clearly conflicts with the commonly understood scientific view that the earth travels around the sun and not the other way around. This conflict appears over and over again in the Bible. Even the Gospels say that the sun rises (Matt. 5:45; Mark 16:2) and sets (Mark 1:32; Luke 4:40).

Is this reference to the behavior of the sun a case of science being right and faith being wrong? Do the heavens declare one thing and the Bible another? Is God lying in the Bible or in the astronomical observations? It is easy to imagine this kind of conflict if one assumes that the scientific way of speaking is the way to speak about truth. Of course, every evening I turn on the television set and listen to a scientist who deals with *chaos theory* every day. (Chaos theory will be discussed in Part V of this book.) This scientist always tells what time the sun will rise and set the next day along with the weather report. Four hundred years after the Copernican Revolution, talk about a sunrise still communicates. The prevailing scientific view is irrelevant to the validity of the communication. The weather person never intended to dispute the idea of a sun-centered solar system. Neither did the Bible intend to teach a particular scientific view. Both communicate with a popularly understood

image without commenting on the scientific validity of the popular image. Tremendous conflicts can arise between science and faith when either expects the creation accounts to follow the scientific method and scientific terminology as the only standard for truth.

The Point of the Creation Accounts

Throughout the Bible, the purpose of telling the story of creation is to explain who God is. The Bible begins by explaining who God is, and the explanation is simple. God is the one who made everything. When Jonah set out to run away from God and found himself on a boat in the midst of a fierce storm, the crew believed one of the gods had been offended. They asked Jonah who he was and he explained, "I am a Hebrew and I worship the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the land" (Jonah 1:9). Jonah used a way of explaining who God is that appears throughout the Bible when people who worship the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob encounter people who do not know the Creator God.

On their first missionary journey, Paul and Barnabas visited the Lycaonian city of Lystra in modern Turkey. The Lystrans worshiped the old gods of the Greek pantheon. When the apostles healed a crippled man, the Lystrans prepared to offer a sacrifice to Paul and Barnabas, whom they took to be Hermes and Zeus visiting earth in human form. Paul's response to them reflects the same starting point used by Jonah to explain who God is:

Men, why are you doing this? We too are only men, human like you. We are bringing you good news, telling you to turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made heaven and earth and sea and everything in them. In the past, he let all nations go their own way. Yet he has not left himself without testimony: He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; he provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy (Acts 14:15-17).

When Paul went to Athens, he had to deal with the same problem. How does one explain who God is to people who have no background for understanding the gospel? How does one explain who God is to people who have a different understanding of spiritual reality? How does one explain who God is to people who have a different worldview? How does one explain who God is to people who have different philosophical presuppositions? In Athens, Paul talked with Epicurean and Stoic philosophers rather than with those involved in the local cult. He spoke to them at the Areopagus

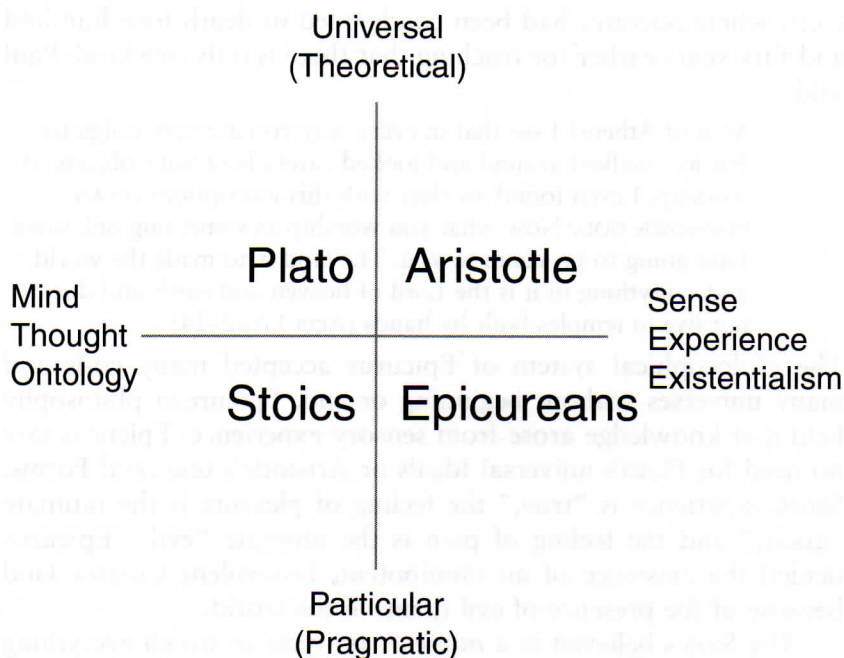
court where Socrates had been condemned to death four hundred and fifty years earlier for teaching that there is only one God. Paul said:

Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands (Acts 17:22–24).

The philosophical system of Epicurus accepted many gods and many universes without beginning or end. Epicurean philosophy held that knowledge arose from sensory experience. Epicurus saw no need for Plato's universal Ideals or Aristotle's universal Forms. Sense experience is "true," the feeling of pleasure is the ultimate "good," and the feeling of pain is the ultimate "evil." Epicurus denied the existence of an omnipotent, benevolent Creator God because of the presence of evil (pain) in the world.

The Stoics believed in a *monistic* universe in which everything is a single whole. "God," Zeus, the Word (Logos), and other similar expressions refer to a greater concentration of the universe but cannot be distinguished from the rest of the universe. The rest of the universe is made from God by God. The universe goes through an endless cycle of organization and destruction which replicates itself each time according to an internal law. Rationality arises with the greater concentration of the universe. The Logos is the seat of the rational law of the universe as a result of the concentration of the universe in the Logos, but people have a degree of rationality about them. For the Stoic, the highest good was to live as a responsible person (see Fig. 5.1).

In his message, Paul addressed the issues that the philosophers addressed, but he gave a perspective of the universe quite different from the universe of the Epicureans or the Stoics. The difference arises from what kind of God exists. The theological thought of the philosophers cannot be separated from their physics. The Epicureans believed in the eternal, unchanging nature of atoms. The Stoics believed that all reality is an aspect of God which takes shape through the four elements: water, earth, air, and fire. These two views represent two entirely different ways of doing science, but they also illustrate how science and faith influence one another through philosophical presuppositions. Paul did not argue with



Plato and Aristotle believed in universals, but Aristotle focused on the senses. The Stoics and Epicureans focused on the particular, but the Epicureans focused on the senses like Aristotle while the Stoics focused on the mind like Plato.

Fig. 5.1. Greek Philosophical Approaches to the World.

their science or their philosophy. Instead, he borrowed from the writings of Epimenides (sixth century B.C.) and Aratus (third century B.C.) to make his point: “God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. *‘For in him we live and move and have our being.’* [Epimenides] As some of your own poets have said, *‘We are his offspring’*” [Aratus] (Acts 17:27–28, author’s emphasis).

Remarkably, the poems refer to Zeus. This passage illustrates the way that the Bible may contain a worldview, a philosophical position, an understanding of science, or even a theological belief which it does not endorse. Statements like these are included because of the worldview of the people being addressed.

The Gospel of John represents another case in which the Bible addresses creation in order to explain what kind of God exists.

This Gospel begins: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning” (John 1:1–2). John used the “Word” terminology of the Stoic philosophers as he began to talk about God and creation. Unlike the Stoics, however, he claimed that the universe had a beginning. John also linked creation with the concept of light and its power over darkness (John 1:3–9). Unlike the Stoics and other monistic worldviews, John made clear that light and darkness are not two aspects of God. John emphasized also that the light associated with creation is not the physical light of science but the spiritual light of faith as he continued the theme throughout his Gospel (John 3:19–21; 8:12; 9:5; 11:9–10; 12:35–36, 46). In fact, this theme continues throughout the Johannine literature (1 John 1:5–7; 2:8–11). The Book of Revelation ends dramatically with a picture of eternity after the present world passes away, and again, it gives insight into the meaning of “light” in relation to creation:

And he carried me away in the Spirit to a mountain great and high, and showed me the Holy City, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God. It shone with the glory of God . . . I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp. The nations will walk by its light. . . . There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light (Rev. 21:10–11a, 22–24a; 22:5a).

On both ends of time, for biblical writers who lived in vastly different cultures, “light” has special meaning for describing what kind of God exists and how God relates to creation. God is the source of light which was present before the creation of physical light sources (i.e., the sun) and after these sources have disappeared.

Alternative Worldviews

The conflict between science and religion about the origin of the universe relates more to a conflict between a philosophy of science and a method of biblical interpretation. From the religious perspective, any question about the origin or nature of the universe depends upon the ultimate question: What kind of God exists? The ancient people accepted common “scientific” understandings of the world in which they lived, but they had radically different understandings of what kind of God exists.

The Hebrews shared with the ancient Babylonians and Egyptians a scientific understanding of their world. Anyone who digs down deep enough will hit water. From this simple and common observation, they knew that the earth rested on the waters. But what kept the earth stable? Obviously, the earth must have a vast foundation reaching down into the fathomless deep. They also observed water falling from the sky. Reason told them that water covered the heavens, but something must hold the waters out. What could be holding the waters out? The ancients had the hypothesis that a great firmament held the waters out. So far, these are not religious views; they are simple scientific observations and hypotheses. People had different theories about the nature of the firmament. It might be a stone vault, a brass shield, or some other structure (see Fig. 5.2). This was the ancient scientific view of the world but not necessarily a science taught or endorsed by the Bible. God communicates with people at their level of understanding, not at his level of understanding.

While the ancients had general agreement about the basic structure of their world, they had dramatically different views of the nature of the world and its relationship to the divine. The waters of the sea were the domain of Dagon (Syria and the Philistines). The earth was the domain of Baal (Phoenicia). The sun which provides light was the domain of Ra (Egypt). The moon which brings light at night was the domain of Nannar (Ur). The chaos before the ordering of creation was the domain of Tiamet (Babylon). Plant and animal fertility belonged to Ishtar (Babylon) or Isis (Egypt). Order and life came about through a great struggle between Marduk and Tiamet (Babylon) or Horus and Set (Egypt). The seasons came about by the repeated murder of Osiris by Set (Egypt) or Baal by Mot (Canaan), and their revival by Isis (Egypt) and Anat (Canaan). Instead of this picture of the world controlled by competing deities at war with one another, the biblical accounts of creation tell of a single God who made everything and sustains it all through his continuing involvement.

The science of the ancient world gradually gave way to the "truth" of Ptolemy's understanding of the world. Ptolemy's world eventually gave way to the world of Copernicus. The world of Copernicus was expanded by Newton, and Newton's world was replaced by Einstein's universe. To discuss a conflict between biblical faith and science, one must first decide which science. The

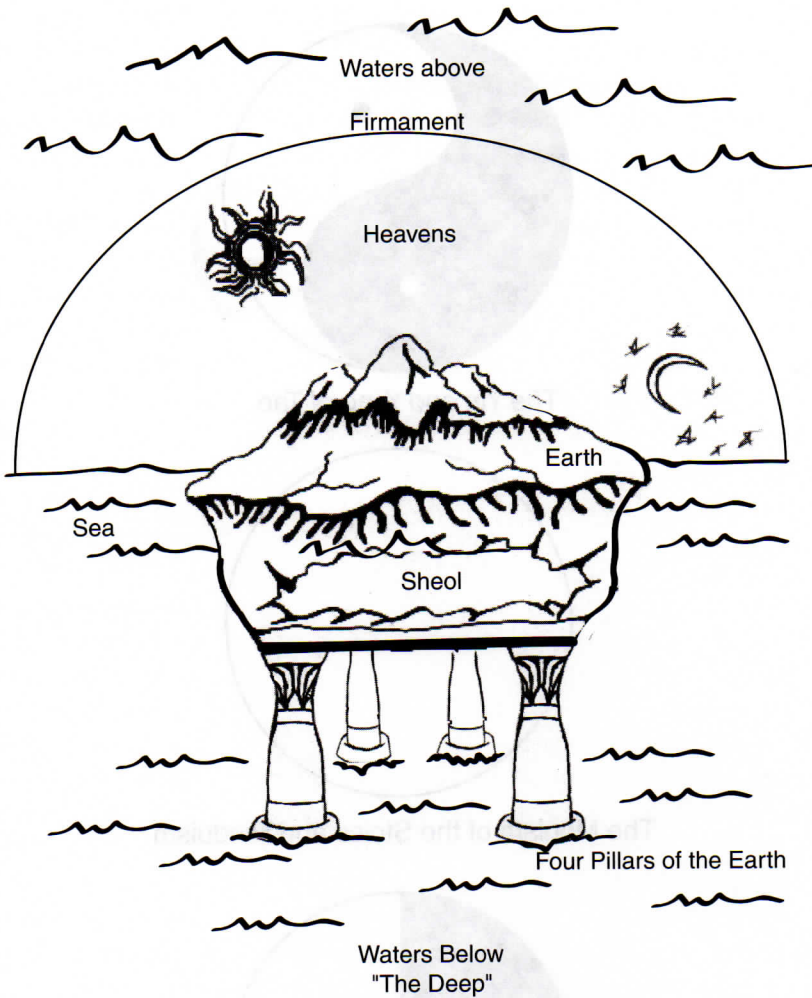
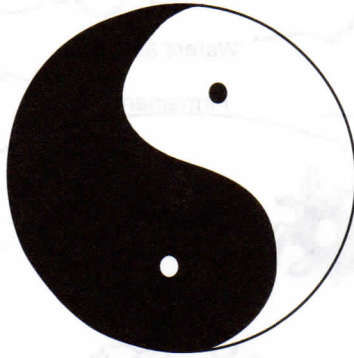


Fig. 5.2. The Hebrew Cosmology.

danger would be to assume that the current science is the true science, but that was always the problem before. We may more safely assume that the current science is not the true science, though it may be more helpful than the old science. Some new discovery and insight will come along some day to replace Einstein's universe with some new understanding of physical reality.

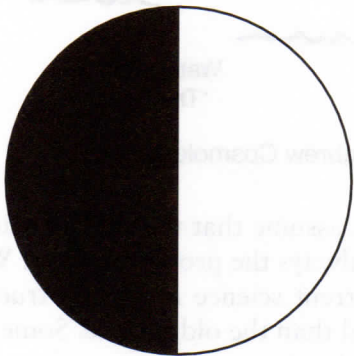
In the meantime, the ancient Hebrew concern for what kind of God exists is still at the center of the conversation between science and faith. In the latter twentieth and early twenty-first centuries,



The Yin and Yang of Tao



The Monism of the Stoics and Hinduism



The Dualism of Zoroastrianism

Fig. 5.3. Alternative Understandings of the Divine.

the West has experienced a revival of the old nature religions that deify the earth and all aspects of nature. It has also experienced a growing fascination with the great religions of the East which have radically different understandings of the divine and how the divine relates to the physical world. The Tao of China regards darkness and light, the yin and the yang, as two equal and opposite aspects of one reality (see Fig. 5.3). Hinduism embraces a monistic view of the divine and the physical order.² Everything is an aspect of the One, and the One is contained within everything; thus, the divine has countless manifestations. Buddhism regards the physical world as an illusion. Only the spiritual is real.

In this climate, people of biblical faith in the West face a challenge they have not faced for a thousand years: pluralism. In the modern era empiricism, rationalism, skepticism, materialism, and existentialism had no place for God. In the postmodern era, however, it seems increasingly apparent that people have an interest in the divine, and they assume some sort of "god" exists. In this climate the relevance and point of the creation accounts appears fresh: What kind of God exists?