

# SEVEN DAYS THAT DIVIDE THE WORLD

THE BEGINNING ACCORDING TO  
GENESIS AND SCIENCE

JOHN C. LENNOX



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# INTRODUCTION

## BEGINNING AT THE BEGINNING

“In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.” These majestic words introduce the most translated, most printed, and most read book in history. I well remember how profoundly they affected me on Christmas Eve 1968, when, as a student at Cambridge University, I heard them read to the watching world on live television by the crew of Apollo 8 as they orbited the moon. The context was a triumphant achievement of science and technology that caught the imagination of the millions of people who watched it. To celebrate that success the astronauts chose to read a text that needed no added explanation or qualification, even though it was written millennia ago. The biblical announcement of the fact of creation was as timelessly clear as it was magnificently appropriate.

However, as distinct from the fact of creation, when it comes to the timing and means of creation, particularly the interpretation of the famous sequence of days with which the book begins, people over the centuries have found the book of Genesis less easy to understand. Indeed, controversy about this matter is at an all-time high, with the debate about teaching creationism and evolution in schools in the USA, the question of faith schools in the UK,<sup>1</sup> and, perhaps most of all, the popular perception of Christianity as unscientific (or even antiscientific) because of the Genesis account — a perception that is vocally endorsed by the New Atheists.

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I once met a brilliant professor of literature from a famous university in a country where it was not easy to discuss the Bible publicly. She was intrigued to learn that I was a scientist who believed the Bible, and she said that she would like to ask me a question she had always wanted to ask but never dared to. She also said, with typically Eastern sensitivity, that she was reluctant to ask me the question in case it offended me: “We were taught at school that the Bible starts with a very silly, unscientific story of how the world was made in seven days. What do you have to say about it as a scientist?”

This book is written for people like her, who have been putting off even considering the Christian faith for this kind of reason. It is also written for the many convinced Christians who are disturbed not only by the controversy but also by the fact that even those who take the Bible seriously do not agree on the interpretation of the creation account. Some think that the only faithful interpretation of Scripture is the young-earth, literal view of the Genesis days that was made famous by Archbishop Ussher (1581–1656) of the city of Armagh in Northern Ireland—where, incidentally, I lived for the first eighteen years of my life. Ussher gave 4004 BC as the date for the origin of the earth. His calculation, based on taking the days of Genesis 1 as twenty-four-hour days of one earth week at the beginning of the universe, is six orders of magnitude away from the current scientific estimate of around four billion years.

Others hold that the text can be understood in concord with contemporary science. Such old-earth creationists are again split over the validity of Darwin’s theory of evolution

valid, others not. Finally, yet others argue that the Genesis account is written to communicate timeless theological truth and that attempts to harmonise it with science are misguided.

The topic is clearly a potential minefield. Yet I do not think that the situation is hopeless. For a start, there are many Christians who, like me, are convinced of the inspiration and authority of Scripture and have spent their lives actively engaged in science. We think that, since God is the author both of his Word the Bible and of the universe, there must ultimately be harmony between correct interpretation of the biblical data and correct interpretation of the scientific data. Indeed, it was the conviction that there was a creative intelligence behind the universe and the laws of nature that gave the prime stimulus and momentum to the modern scientific quest to understand nature and its laws in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Furthermore, science—far from making God redundant and irrelevant, as atheists often affirm—actually confirms his existence, which is the theme of my book *God's Undertaker: Has Science Buried God?*<sup>2</sup>

## ORGANISATION OF THE BOOK

This book has five chapters and five appendices. As an introduction to controversy and how we handle it, the first chapter discusses the challenge which the scientific theory that the earth was moving in space posed to generally accepted biblical interpretation in the sixteenth-century. The second chapter moves on to some principles of biblical interpretation and applies them to that controversy. The third is the heart of the book, where we consider the interpretation of

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the Genesis days. The fourth is given over to the biblical account of the origin of human beings, their antiquity, and related theological questions about death. Finally, in the fifth chapter we balance our discussion of the creation week by drawing on the New Testament in order to learn what aspects of the Genesis 1 creation narrative are emphasized there, and why they are relevant for us today.

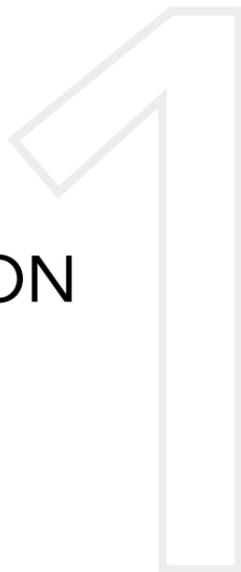
The appendices deal with several issues that, though important, are placed at the end of the book so that the reader can engage with the main biblical material without many digressions. Appendix A looks at the background of Genesis, in terms of culture and literature. Appendix B is devoted to what is called the cosmic temple view of Genesis 1. Appendix C describes the convergence of Genesis and science over the fact that space-time had a beginning. Appendix D considers the question of whether there is conflict between Genesis 1 and Genesis 2. Finally, appendix E considers theistic evolution, with special attention paid to the so-called God-of-the-gaps arguments.

I would like to emphasise that this little book does not pretend to be exhaustive in its scope. It has been written in response to frequent requests over the years. In order to keep the book short, I have had to prioritise those issues about which I have been most often questioned. Many other interesting questions have had to be omitted.

## NOTES

1. These are confessional schools of Jewish, Christian, Muslim, or any other religious foundation.
2. John C. Lennox, *God's Undertaker: Has Science Buried God?* (Oxford: Lion Hudson, 2009).

# BUT DOES IT MOVE? A LESSON FROM HISTORY



THIS BOOK IS ABOUT a very controversial topic. Disagreement about it has been rather acrimonious at times. However, even though I am Irish, I am not going to suggest that the best way to approach it is to have a good fight! Indeed, in order to get some kind of perspective on the way we handle controversy, I wish to go back to another major controversy, one that arose in the sixteenth century. If I had been writing a book at that time, I might well have been addressing the question, what are we to think of astronomer Nicholas Copernicus's suggestion that the earth moves, when Scripture seems to teach that the earth is immovably fixed in space?

This may not seem to be a huge deal nowadays, but at the time it was a very hot topic. The reason? In the fourth century BC the famous Greek philosopher Aristotle taught that

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the earth was fixed in the centre of the universe and that the sun, stars, and planets revolved around it.<sup>1</sup> This fixed-earth view held sway for centuries even though, as early as 250 BC, Aristarchus of Samos proposed a heliocentric<sup>2</sup> system. After all, it made a lot of sense to ordinary people: the sun appears to go round the earth; and, if the earth moves, why aren't we all flung off into space? Why does a stone, thrown straight up into the air, come straight down if the earth is rotating rapidly? Why don't we feel a strong wind blowing in our faces in the opposite direction to our motion? Surely the idea that the earth moves is absurd?

Aristotle's work was translated into Latin, and in the Middle Ages, with the aid of the massive intellect of Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274), it came to influence the Roman Catholic Church.

We note in passing that Aristotle believed not only that the universe was old, but that it had always existed. Aquinas had no difficulty reconciling an eternal universe with the existence of God as Creator in a philosophical sense, but he admitted that there was difficulty reconciling it with the Bible, since the Bible clearly said there had been a beginning. The fixed earth was different: it seemed to fit in well with what the Bible said. For instance:

Tremble before him, all the earth; yes, the world is established; it shall never be moved. (1 Chron. 16:30)

Yes, the world is established; it shall never be moved. (Ps. 93:1)

He set the earth on its foundations, so that it should never be moved. (Ps. 104:5)

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For the pillars of the earth are the LORD's, and on them he has set the world. (1 Sam. 2:8)

Furthermore, the Bible seemed not only to teach that the earth was fixed; it seemed equally clearly to say that the sun moved:

In them he has set a tent for the sun, which comes out like a bridegroom leaving his chamber, and, like a strong man, runs its course with joy. Its rising is from the end of the heavens, and its circuit to the end of them, and there is nothing hidden from its heat. (Ps. 19:4–6)

The sun rises, and the sun goes down, and hastens to the place where it rises. (Eccl. 1:5)

So it is not surprising that when in 1543 Copernicus published his famous work *On the Revolutions of the Celestial Orbs*, in which he advanced the view that the earth and the planets orbited the sun, this startling new scientific theory was called into question by Protestants and Catholics alike. It is alleged that even before Copernicus published his book, Martin Luther had rejected the heliocentric point of view in rather strong terms in his *Table Talk* (1539):

There is talk of a new astrologer who wants to prove that the earth moves and goes around instead of the sky, the sun, the moon, just as if somebody were moving in a carriage or ship might hold that he was sitting still and at rest while the earth and the trees walked and moved. But that is how things are nowadays: when a man wishes to be clever he must . . . invent something special, and the way he does it must needs be the best! The fool wants to turn the whole art of astronomy upside-down. However, as Holy Scripture tells us, so did Joshua bid the sun to stand still and not the earth.<sup>3</sup>

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Many of Luther's comments in *Table Talk* were made tongue in cheek, and there is considerable debate about the authenticity of this quote. Historian John Hedley Brooke writes, "Whether Luther really referred to Copernicus as a fool has been doubted, but in an off-the-cuff dismissal he remembered that Joshua had told the sun, not the earth, to stand still."<sup>4</sup>

John Calvin, on the other hand, clearly believed that the earth was fixed: "By what means could it [the earth] maintain itself unmoved, while the heavens above are in constant rapid motion, did not its Divine Maker fix and establish it?"<sup>5</sup>

Some years after Copernicus, in 1632, Galileo challenged the Aristotelian view in his famous book *Dialogue concerning the Two Chief World Systems*. This incident has gone down in history as an iconic example of how religion is antagonistic to science. Yet Galileo, far from being an atheist, was driven by his deep inner conviction that the Creator, who had "endowed us with senses, reason and intellect," intended us not to "forgo their use and by some other means to give us knowledge which we can attain by them."<sup>6</sup> Galileo held that the laws of nature are written by the hand of God in the "language of mathematics"<sup>7</sup> and that the "human mind is a work of God and one of the most excellent."<sup>8</sup>

Galileo was attacked for his theory of a moving earth, first by the Aristotelian philosophers, and then by the Roman Catholic Church. The issue at stake was clear: Galileo's science was threatening the all-pervasive Aristotelianism of both academy and church. The conflict was far more between two "scientific" world-pictures than between

science and religion. In the end, Galileo had to “recant” under pressure but still (according to the story) could not help muttering to his inquisitors, “But it does move.”

There is, of course, no excuse whatsoever for the Roman Catholic Church’s use of the Inquisition to muzzle Galileo, nor for its subsequently taking several centuries to rehabilitate him. Yet, again contrary to popular belief, Galileo was never tortured, and his subsequent house arrest was spent, for the most part, in luxurious private residences belonging to friends. Furthermore, the scientist brought some of his problems on himself by his lack of tact.

Many historians of science conclude that the Galileo affair really does nothing to confirm the simplistic conflict view of the relationship of science to religion.<sup>9</sup>

It subsequently took many years to establish the heliocentric view, which my readers, I presume, now accept, being quite comfortable with the idea that not only does the earth rotate about its own axis, but it moves in an elliptical orbit round the sun at an average of 30 km/sec (about 67,000 mph), taking a year to complete the circuit.

But now we need to face an important question: why do Christians accept this “new” interpretation, and not still insist on a “literal” understanding of the “pillars of the earth”? Why are we not still split up into fixed-earthers and moving-earthers? Is it really because we have all compromised, and made Scripture subservient to science?

## NOTES

1. Often referred to as the Ptolemaic system.
2. *Heliocentric* means “with the sun at the centre,” from the Greek *helios*, “sun.”

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3. Martin Luther, *Table Talk*, quoted in Nicolaus Copernicus, *On the Revolutions of the Heavenly Spheres*, reprinted in *Great Books of the Western World* (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1939), 499–838.
4. John Hedley Brooke, *Science and Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 96.
5. John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949), 4:6–7.
6. Letter to Grand Duchess Christina, 1615.
7. Stillman Drake, *Discoveries and Opinions of Galileo* (New York: Doubleday, 1957), 237.
8. Galileo Galilei, *Dialogue concerning the Two Chief World Systems*, trans. Stillman Drake (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1953), 104.
9. See John C. Lennox, *God's Undertaker: Has Science Buried God?* (Oxford: Lion Hudson, 2009), 23–26.