

Skeptical | Isn't the Bible Incompatible with Science | June 16, 2019 | McNutt

[Slide 1] Skeptical! Something I'd like to point out, and that's listed in your bulletin; every Sunday, directly below us there are half a dozen different classes for adults. While we've loved doing the Skeptical series, there's always going to be a limit in the degree to which we can interact with each other over the content. Our classes downstairs are able to do deep dives into the material, tackle tough questions on a weekly basis, and do so in a way that you can interact with the material, the leader and the other people in the class. People can take a time out for questions, to share insights. If you have enjoyed this sermon series at all, and you aren't currently in a class, then you need to check them out. We have incredible teachers who would love to see you check out their classes!

[Slide 2] Today we're asking the questions, **Isn't the Bible Incompatible with Science?** I'm excited; this is one of those hot button questions that Christians gear up for a fight immediately – and I love angry emails.

Here's the thing; we don't have a great track record in this area, do we? Well intentioned believers over the centuries have panicked at any perceived threat to scripture; whether it was labeling those who believed the earth was not the center of the universe as heretics centuries ago, to forcing court battles over evolution being taught in schools. [Slide 3] Over the last century, in particular, since **the Scopes Monkey trials of 1925**, many Christians have treated science and faith as incompatible, as an either/or scenario. It's rooted in fear; a fear that science could somehow disprove God or invalidate our faith.

Not only is this approach ineffective; it's dangerous. Many young people leave the faith when they enter college and point to this issue of faith and science as the reason¹; they grew up being taught they had to believe a certain way, or they are rejecting God. They go off to college and they hear compelling arguments for things they were told were against God, so they find themselves thinking, "I guess I can't follow God."

[Slide 4] I find myself asking a couple questions; the first is this – does fear based faith reflect a healthy understanding of God's power?

[Slide 5] Psalm 147:5 (NIV) Great is our Lord and mighty in power; his understanding has no limit

Jeremiah 32:27 (NIV) "I am the Lord, the God of all mankind. Is anything too hard for me?"

¹ John H. Walton, *The Lost World of Adam and Eve: Genesis 2-3 and the Human Origins Debate* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, an imprint of InterVarsity Press, 2015), 209.

I find it hard to believe that God is threatened by the things we so often find ourselves anxious about, reacting to, angrily Facebooking about.

[Slide 6] The second question I have is this; are we asking the wrong questions of Scripture?

There is a hilarious British science fiction book called, *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. In the book, there is an alien race that wanted to know the answer to life, the universe and everything, so they designed the most powerful computer in the universe to find the answer. The computer, named Deep Thought, tells them it will take seven and a half million years to answer. Finally, the day arrives and Phouchg and Loonquawl are chosen to be the ones to hear and tell the rest of the planet [Slide 7];

"You're really not going to like it," observed Deep Thought. "Tell us!" "All right," said Deep Thought. "The Answer to the Great Question . . ." "Yes . . . !" "Of Life, the Universe and Everything . . ." said Deep Thought. "Yes . . . !" "Is . . ." said Deep Thought, and paused. "Yes . . . !" "Is . . ." "Yes . . . !!! . . . ?" "Forty-two," said Deep Thought, with infinite majesty and calm.

It was a long long time before anyone spoke. Out of the corner of his eye Phouchg could see the sea of tense expectant faces down in the square outside. "We're going to get lynched, aren't we?" he whispered.

"It was a tough assignment," said Deep Thought mildly.

"Forty-two!" yelled Loonquawl. "Is that all you've got to show for seven and a half million years' work?"

"I checked it very thoroughly," said the computer, "and that quite definitely is the answer. I think the problem, to be quite honest with you, is that you've never actually known what the question is."

"But it was the Great Question! The Ultimate Question of Life, the Universe and Everything," howled Loonquawl.

"Yes," said Deep Thought with the air of one who suffers fools gladly, "but what actually is it?" A slow stupefied silence crept over the men as they stared at the computer and then at each other.

"Well, you know, it's just Everything . . . everything . . ." offered Phouchg weakly.

"Exactly!" said Deep Thought. "So once you do know what the question actually is, you'll know what the answer means."²

² Adams, Douglas. *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* (Random House Publishing Group), Kindle Edition, 106-109.

I love the idea that they didn't know the question for the answer they were given; when we talk about the topic of origins, of science and faith, we can find ourselves asking the wrong questions. These passages of Scripture that we debate were written 3500 years ago, in an ancient culture and language, with a far different set of values and ways of looking at the world than we have today. It is dangerous to assume what was written then was intended to answer science related questions we would have today.

[Slide 8] *2 Timothy 3:16 (NLT) "All Scripture is inspired by God."* I absolutely believe that. Yet, some look at scripture and find what they believe are contradictions and errors. God's inspiration is perfect, given for what He wants us to know; if there are challenges in interpretation, that is because of our imperfect, limited perspectives. Our culture, our perspective, our bias can all lead astray in interpreting scripture.

[Slide 9] An important piece to finding the question that scripture is answering is understanding the genres that the Bible was written in.³ There are actually quite a few; **Historical**; The **Law**, **Wisdom literature**, **Psalms**, **Prophecy**, **Apocalyptic** (books like Revelation), the **Gospels**, and the **Epistles** (New Testament letters).

Here's an example of how genre can make a difference in interpretation; there are several instances in Song of Solomon where the woman is described as sick with love. Some, viewing it as literal history, have theorized that she may have had some sort of STD. I'm not making this up. But it's ancient erotic poetry! It's communicating a feeling; that she's lovesick!

Let me quote one of the greatest love poems of our modern age:

*But I would walk 500 miles
And I would walk 500 more
Just to be the man who walks a thousand miles
To fall down at your door
Da da da (da da da)
Da da da (da da da)
Da da da dun diddle un diddle un diddle uh da*

A selection from the greatest song ever, The Proclaimers' "I'm gonna be (500 miles).

Could you imagine if these lyrics were discovered 3500 years from now as one of the remnants of our time? Perhaps archaeologists would speculate at its meaning; it would appear that there was a man in love with a woman. He began walking to her thinking she was 500 miles away, then realized it was 500 more. It's ridiculous; we know it's a song, poetry designed to convey an emotion of love, not a literal description of events. Knowing the genre shapes how we approach and understand the text.

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Biblical_genre

[Slide 10] Do you see what genre is missing? **Science**. The Bible was not intended to be a scientific textbook. God's goal was not to explain the mechanics of the universe. The genres used all shared one purpose, to paint the narrative of how a broken, sinful people can be reunited with God.

How does understanding the culture and genre impact how we understand some of the verses that people wrestle with when it comes to the question of science and faith?

[Slide 11] *Genesis 1:6-8 (NIV) ⁶ And God said, "Let there be a vault between the waters to separate water from water." ⁷ So God made the vault and separated the water under the vault from the water above it. And it was so. ⁸ God called the vault "sky." And there was evening, and there was morning—the second day.*

Older translations tend to use words like "vault" and "firmament". One translation even uses the word "dome," creating a word picture that God created a dome to separate the ocean of water in the sky from the water below. In the ancient Hebrew, they understood it as a hard surface holding up water above the earth.

Another passage, Genesis 7:11, writing about when the flood happens, also mentions this water above;

[Slide 12] *Genesis 7:11 (NIV) In the six hundredth year of Noah's life, on the seventeenth day of the second month—on that day all the springs of the great deep burst forth, and the floodgates of the heavens were opened.*

There's an approach to interpreting scripture called **concordism**; concordism believes that science must agree with scripture, so people have created theories to explain how there was an ocean of water above the sky thousands of years ago that is no longer there. One theory believes that when the flood happened, the water came down and then was absorbed into the earth. To date, there has not been any evidence discovered to support such an idea.

There is another conflict, however, with that approach to interpreting these passages. If correct, then scripture should no longer suggest such an ocean above the sky exists after the flood happened, however, thousands of years later King David writes:

[Slide 13] *Psalms 104:6 (NIV) You covered it with the watery depths as with a garment; the waters stood above the mountains.*

In the Hebrew, it is clear from his perspective there was a massive amount of water around the earth. He mentioned it again later:

Psalms 148:4 (NIV) Praise him, you highest heavens and you waters above the skies.

What do we do with these verses? [Slide 14] We know from other ancient documents that at the time of the writing of Genesis, the scientific understanding throughout the

known world was what we now refer to as a “three-tiered universe.” Ancient Jews, like the world around them, believed the earth was flat and that there were three levels, or tiers, to it.

- **First Tier:** The lower level/foundation, where Sheol was – a form of hell.
- **Second Tier:** The middle level was believed to be a giant circle; a land mass surrounded by water. We can see verses that talk about the circle of land or describe the world as a circle; we assume from our knowledge that it's talking about a globe. But that was not the assumption of the ancients, or how they would have understood it.
- **Third Tier:** The third tier was the firmament, a dome, with water above it. They believed that the sun and the stars and the moon were all the same distance from us, that they were just different sizes. At the top was a gateway, above which was God. When verses talk about God being able to see all that there was, they understood that it was a flat earth and his eyeline could encompass all of it.

We hear that and think it's ridiculous. But they didn't have the technology we have; it was the scientific understanding of the day. They saw water coming down from the sky, there were no rivers going up to the sky, therefore there must be an ocean above the sky – after all, the sky is blue, like water. From their ancient perspective, it just made sense.

Here are a couple more verses that point to this understanding of a three-tiered universe:

[Slide 15] *Psalm 104:5 (NIV) He set the earth on its foundations; it can never be moved.*

For centuries theologians were convinced the earth was in a fixed place. You may have even heard in your history classes how it used to be believed that the sun orbited around the earth. Galileo got in a lot of trouble for suggesting otherwise.

Ecclesiastes 1:5 (NIV) The sun rises and the sun sets, and hurries back to where it rises.

They believed Galileo was a heretic because he seemed to be contradicting the Bible. The Bible seemed to plainly say that the Earth doesn't move, the sun moves. Centuries later, we know the sun is the center of our solar system. We understand now that those verses aren't talking about the literal position of the earth - they're driving home the reality that in God's perspective humanity is the center of His love.

We may have resolved our theology on whether our planet is the center of the universe, but there are still passages in Genesis that people debate.

[Slide 16] John Walton, a theologian, wrote; **“We must keep in mind that we are presumptuous if we consider our interpretations of Scripture to have the same authority as Scripture itself. Nobody is an infallible interpreter, and we must always stand ready to reconsider our interpretations in light of new information. We must not let our interpretations stand in the place of Scripture’s authority and thus risk misrepresenting God’s revelation.”**⁴

If I read something in the Bible and it doesn’t line up with what I believe, the answer isn’t to rewrite the facts or come up with elaborate explanations to explain why I’m still right; the answer is to reconsider my interpretation and adjust. Confronted with new information, the religious leaders of Galileo’s time refused to recognize the flaws in their interpretation; today their refusal makes them look foolish.

The pharisees had spent centuries debating and memorizing Old Testament prophecies regarding the Messiah; they were so convinced of their interpretation that they could not recognize who Jesus truly was.

A century from now, will believers look back at us the same way we look at the believers who labeled Galileo a heretic?

Why does the Bible say the earth is the center of the universe? Why does it seem to support a view of the world that is based on three tiers?

[Slide 17] **God accommodates us.** When God was inspiring the writing of the Bible, His goal was to point the readers to Himself, to lay out a path for us to be restored to Him – not create a scientific explanation of our universe. The question being answered is not “how did it all begin,” it is “how do we know God?”

Accommodating means God uses our knowledge to make the point He wants to make. When a five-year-old asks, “where do babies come from?”, we typically do not explain the details of sexual reproduction to them. We say, “babies come from mommy’s belly.” We accommodate their level of understanding while still pointing them to the truth. Babies do come from a mother’s belly, but there is a lot more to it than just that.

In scripture, the core of what is communicated is true: creation comes from God. But God was accommodating a world that believed in a three-tier universe, a world with limited scientific knowledge. He did not reveal information thousands of years before they would understand it; even for us today science is a constantly changing thing. We laugh at some of the things they thought were scientific fact just a century ago; a hundred years from now they’re going to do the same thing about some of the things we believe today. God used their current level of understanding to make His point.

[Slide 18] What then is the Bible's purpose? It is **to guide us to God.**

⁴ *The Lost World of Genesis One: Ancient Cosmology and the Origins Debate* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2010), 168.

[Slide 19] *Psalm 119:105 (NIV) Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path.*

[Slide 20] *2 Timothy 3:15-17 (NLT) ¹⁵ You have been taught the holy Scriptures from childhood, and they have given you the wisdom to receive the salvation that comes by trusting in Christ Jesus. ¹⁶ All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful to teach us what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives. It corrects us when we are wrong and teaches us to do what is right. ¹⁷ God uses it to prepare and equip his people to do every good work.*

From the Genesis to Revelation, the point of Scripture is to point us to God.

Dr. Paul Wallace, a noted astrophysicist who grew up in a Christian home, went off to college and found himself rejecting God. He had been raised to believe that science and faith are not compatible. When he found the scientific evidence to be compelling, he felt he had no choice but to reject God. But then as he dove deeper into science, he started to see God all over it. He discovered that faith and science complement one another. He wrote in his book;

[Slide 21] **“One of the great moments of my life came when I understood for the first time that being a Christian is about one thing and one thing only: making a conscious commitment to follow Jesus.”⁵**

[Slide 22] Part of today's point is to frame what we're going to do this summer in our Summer Series downstairs; when we dive into creation during the month of July, are the questions we're asking the right ones? Do we come at it so determined that what our traditions have already taught us are right that we're not open to see new things that God is teaching us? Or are we coming at it from a framework that sees God as still helping us to understand what He wrote and what it means? That maybe it's possible to have different interpretations about these passages in Genesis and still love and honor God?

All truth is God's truth. Science is not the enemy of faith; in fact, according to one article I read, half of scientists claim to hold to a faith. Creation declares the wonder of God. Ultimately, the goal of scripture is to point us to God

⁵ Paul Wallace, *Stars Beneath Us: Finding God in the Evolving Cosmos* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2015), 124.