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Ellis White, Pastoral Intern
Chapel Hill Presbyterian Church

Fearless Q: How Do We Reconcile the Bible and Science?

Genesis 1

Kids, I need two volunteers... [Hand one child a big yellow ball, another a small blue ball] Okay, Blue, I need you to stand still and face forward. Yellow, I need you to walk around blue in a circle. Keep walking until I say stop.

400 years before Jesus, there was a Greek man named Aristotle, who taught that the earth was at the center of the universe, and everything else rotated around it. Blue, here, is the earth and she is standing still. While yellow, here, is the sun, and he is moving around the earth. For almost 2000 years, everyone understood that the earth was at the center of the universe. And Christians found this idea in the Bible too. In Psalm 104:5 we read: '[God] set the earth on its foundations, so that it should never be moved.' (Psalm 104:5)

But then, along came a Polish man named Copernicus. He did some scientific investigation, and found out that everything made much more sense if we put the sun in the middle. So, yellow, I need you to stand still. And, blue, I need you to start walking around yellow. This is the model we have today. But people didn't believe Copernicus right away. Especially the church. Another scientist around the time of Copernicus was an Italian man named Galileo. He got in a big fight with the Pope about this issue. Galileo said that the earth moved around the sun, but the Pope maintained that the Bible taught that the earth didn't move. Galileo believed that the Bible could be understood a different way, but in the end Galileo was condemned as a heretic.

The church eventually came to realize that Psalm 104:5 and other similar verses were not referring to the earth's physical movement, but rather God's control of the earth's stability. As other things crumble and fade, the earth will be sustained by God's providence. The reality is the Bible has little to say on the issue of the earth's physical movement. Now, as a church, we believe that the Sun is at the center of our solar system, and the earth rotates around it. Not because the Bible tells us so, but because science tells us so. Thanks Blue and Yellow, you can go have a seat.

We've reached the end of our Fearless Q series and have only one question left: How do we reconcile the Bible and science? Many of you wrote in about this and asked it in different ways. 'As a Christian, do you really believe the earth is only 6000 years old?' 'Where do cave men and dinosaurs fit into the Bible timeline?' 'How do you answer someone's question about creation vs. evolution?' And these are really great questions, because for many of us, it seems that science and the

Bible are in conflict. Science tells us one thing is true, the Bible seems to tell us the opposite. So today, I want to address that question: How do we reconcile the Bible and science? (A little disclaimer. I will not be able to cover everything in the next 15 minutes, but I will do what I can. There may be times when you want to ask a question or even tell me what you think. If you do, I'd love you to write that down on the blue slip of paper in your bulletin and put it in the purple baskets on the way out.)

I want to start by talking a little about what science aims to do, and what the Bible aims to do. To do so, kids I need two more volunteers. [Hand one child a hula hoop with 'WHY' written through the middle, hand another child a hula hoop with 'HOW' written through the middle]. When it comes to science and the Bible, I want to suggest that primarily, they are each asking a different question.

Science is primarily concerned with the 'How?' question. That is, science is concerned primarily with the question of mechanism. How does this work? How did the earth come into existence? How did life start? The Bible, on the other hand, is more concerned with the 'Why?' question. That is, the Bible is concerned primarily with the question of purpose. Why is the world the way it is? Why is there something instead of nothing? Why do I exist? In our example with the sun and the earth, science was concerned with how the sun and the earth moved, but the Bible was concerned with why the earth was stable. Science was concerned with how, but the Bible was concerned with why.

Now, this is a generalization, and it doesn't mean science never asks 'Why?', it's just that when science asks why, it is usually in the form of: 'Why is this blood vessel there?' Really it is a question of why does this function the way it does, rather than what is the purpose of the whole system in the first place. So although it is a generalization, it can be a very helpful one when we deal with this issue of reconciling the Bible and science. Because most of the time science and the Bible are not in conflict.

But there are times when the Bible steps into the realm of science—into the 'How?' questions—and talks about the physical universe and how it functions. One of these instances is found in the first chapter of the Bible, Genesis 1. Here, the Bible does talk about how this world came into existence, and this is where we see conflict. These are the areas that we need to reconcile. [Send kids back to their seats]

So what does Genesis 1 say about the physical universe and how it functions? To know what Genesis 1 says, we need to determine what sort of literature, what genre, Genesis, and in particular, Genesis 1 is. Why? Genre tells you what the words intend to communicate. If I write a letter to someone and tell them, 'The car flew down the street', they understand that I don't literally mean there was a flying car; but if it was a science paper, or a police report with the same words, you might think I was actually talking about a flying car. Genre tells you what the words

intend to communicate. So is Genesis 1 a poem? Or a scientific document? Or something else?

We need to recognize that Genesis was not written recently, but thousands of years ago in an ancient context. In order to determine the genre, we must look to other writings in that context to understand what genre Genesis 1 is. And when we look at that context we discover there is a whole ancient genre of literature devoted to creation stories. We have records of many of them, and many of them bear great similarities with that of Genesis 1. Enough similarities that scholars believe the genre of Genesis 1 is that of an ancient creation story. However, there are some significant differences between Genesis 1 and other ancient creation stories. And when we see these differences, I believe we get at the heart of what Genesis 1 is trying to tell us.

One of those creation stories that we have a good record of was the Babylonian creation story 'Enuma Elish'. And when we compare Genesis 1 to this story, we notice some distinct differences, differences that many believe were the points Genesis 1 intended to communicate. Here are the major three: (1) God is uncreated. In the opening words of Genesis, we read, 'In the beginning God.' God existed before anything else. In the Enuma Elish, we find that the universe existed first, and the universe created the gods. (2) There is one God. In Genesis we read of one God, unlike the many of Enuma Elish. Further, in Genesis 1, the things that God created are not made out to be gods themselves. The sun and the moon are simply light-bearers, not gods to be worshipped. This was unheard of in the ancient world! (3) Humans are the pinnacle of creation. In the Enuma Elish, humans were an afterthought, created to lighten the load of the gods, but in Genesis 1, humans are the only created thing made in the image of God, to rule over the earth. Humans are the pinnacle of God's creation.

When we compare Genesis 1 to other books in the same genre, I believe we get closer to the heart of what Genesis 1 is trying to tell us. But the problem is, we don't read it in that context today. I think very often we approach Genesis 1 as if it were written in the twenty-first century by a person who has knowledge of modern science. And as a result we interpret it to say things it was never intended to say! Now, this doesn't mean it has nothing to say about modern science, but we need to be careful to understand what Genesis 1 was intended to say in its original context first.

In its original context, Genesis 1 was a statement to the surrounding nations that everything in this world was the result, not of the gods of the world superpowers like Babylon, but of the God of this tiny, little nation of Israel. That the God of Israel was the only God who created everything, and was himself uncreated. And therefore he alone was worthy of worship and praise, not the others gods, because he alone had ultimate power. The statements Genesis 1 makes about creation fall more in the 'Why?' category than the 'How?' one, just like the statements the Bible

makes about the earth's movement fell more in the 'Why?' category than the 'How?' one.

But yet we feel a significant conflict between Genesis 1 and modern science. Why? Well, I believe the conflict is not so much with science, but with a particular brand of scientific atheism. This brand of atheism has its own creation story, not based upon science, but based upon atheistic beliefs. And in this creation story, creative power is given to the laws of science itself, treating them almost like gods. Stephen Hawking said it this way:

'Because there is a law such as gravity, the universe can and will create itself from nothing.' (Stephen Hawking, 'The Grand Design')

The creation story of scientific atheists is that science itself, through its laws, has creative power. But this is like saying that because we understand the laws of physics that govern a jet engine, a jet engine can and will create itself from nothing. The laws of science describe the mechanism but they are not the creative agency. The laws of science themselves cannot create a jet engine; what is needed is an external agent, like a mechanic. And Genesis 1 certainly has something to say about an external agent who created the universe—namely, God.

The conflict we feel between science and the Bible may actually be more of a conflict between atheism and the Bible. Science, in its purest sense, cannot answer the question of whether or not there is a god. Just like science cannot answer the question of what is beauty, or why is there something instead of nothing. The major point that Genesis 1 intends to make—that God is the creator—is not in conflict with science.

Having said all this, there are some aspects of Genesis 1 that seek to address how the universe was created. There are times when Genesis 1 steps into the realm of science—into the 'How?' It's not at the heart of what Genesis 1 is saying, but it is there. For example, it speaks of days of creation, it says the sun was created after there was day and night, and it speaks of humanity being distinct from animals. But many have reconciled what Genesis 1 appears to be saying about how the world was created with what science says. And I wish I had time to address all those issues here, but I don't. If this is something you want to read about though, I have found one approach particularly insightful—that of my former professor, John Lennox.

His approach in the book 'Seven Days That Divide the World,' seeks to be faithful to the authority of scripture, and to find where current science converges with the interpretation of Scripture. It is quite unique and beautiful. I have a few copies to give away, so if you will read it, come and grab one at the end. In truth, there are many Christians who uphold the authority of the Bible, and have reconciled what Genesis 1 says with science; John Lennox is not the only one. What the Bible says

about how the world is created is reconcilable with science. And I believe this gives us a reason not to be afraid.

Maybe, for many of us, our concern regarding this issue is rooted in just that—fear. Fear that science is somehow going to destroy Christianity. Fear that science is going to make our children or grandchildren deny God. Fear that science has an almost divine power over our lives.

And I wonder if the original readers of Genesis 1—the people of Israel—similarly felt afraid. Not of the power of science, or scientific atheism, but afraid of the gods of the superpowers surrounding them. And as they heard the words of Genesis 1, they were reminded that their God—Yahweh—the God of this tiny, little nation, had created everything that they saw. That his power was matchless in comparison to the power of the nations surrounding them. And as they heard and came to know of this power, all fear was cast out. That they could trust and believe that their God, the creator of the world, who had delivered them out of slavery, had brought them into the promised land... that their God was the one true God, and they need not be afraid.

My prayer is that we might have that same revelation today. That our God—the same God who created the world, who came to us Himself in the person of Jesus Christ to ultimately defeat the powers of this world—that our God is greater than any other power in this world. And that we might be fearless in the face of all that surrounds us. Trusting that if our God is for us, nothing can stand against us.