

# The *SBJT* Forum: “In the Beginning...”

*Editor’s Note:* Readers should be aware of the forum’s format. D. A. Carson, Kirk Wellum, Todd L. Miles, Terry Mortenson, and C. Everett Berry have been asked specific questions to which they have provided written responses. These writers are not responding to one another. The journal’s goal for the Forum is to provide significant thinkers’ views on topics of interest without requiring lengthy articles from these heavily-committed individuals. Their answers are presented in an order that hopefully makes the forum read as much like a unified presentation as possible.

**SBJT: In any complex debate, it is not long before there are “hidden” elements in the discussion, i.e., elements that are gumming up the integrity of debate because one side or the other fails to recognize their existence and significance. What “hidden” elements are there in current discussions over science and origins?**

**D. A. Carson:** I shall mention three, and then offer a concluding reflection.

(1) Considerable confusion exists over what a biblically faithful understanding of the relationship between God and the created order ought to be. Consider three possibilities. (a) In an *open* universe (not to be confused with “open theism”), God interacts openly with the created order. Everything that takes place in creation takes place because of the explicit control that God exercises. The only determination of any event is the will of God, directly and immediately controlling everything. It is difficult to distinguish “miracle” from any other event, because God stands immediately behind *every* event; equally, it is almost impossible to envisage what “science” might be, for everything is immediately traceable to the mind and will of God. Moreover, this way of looking at things often leads to fatalism.

The only “cause” of anything is the immediate will of God. (b) The direct opposite of the first option is the *closed* universe. By this I mean that everything that happens in the universe is caused by other things in the universe. There is no outsider, and certainly no God who reaches in and controls things. Cause and effect take place within the closed order of creation. Obviously, science is not only possible, it is the only rational way to try to understand sequences of events, whether in history or in the physical order more broadly. (c) An alternative to both is the *ordered and controlled* universe. Here everything that happens takes place within God’s control: not a bird falls from the heavens, Jesus reminds us, apart from God’s sanction. Paul tells the Ephesians that God orders all things according to the counsel of his own will. Yet God normally does things in a regular way. That is precisely why science is possible. God has created all things in a certain way, and ordains things to interact with one another in a regular and particular fashion. But God does not then step away from the created order and simply let things take their course. He continues to be in charge, and nothing occurs apart from his sanction. The biblical writers know of the water

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cycle: Qoheleth, for instance, knows of rain that falls on the land, forms streams and rivers, returns to the sea, is evaporated into the skies, and falls again as rain. But the biblical writers' knowledge of the water cycle does not prevent them from preferring to say that God sends the rain. All of the physical phenomena bound up with the water cycle are ordered by God. They are regular, analyzable, measurable. Science is thus not only possible, but a means of discovering how God *regularly* does things through means he himself has established and ordered, and which he continues to control. On the other hand, nothing prevents him from doing something very unusual, quite outside the regular ordered array. That is what we call a miracle, and, precisely because such an event does not follow a regular pattern, science is unlikely to have any useful or accurate explanation. Moreover, this side of the resurrection we may rightly insist that it is Christ himself who upholds all things by his powerful word; Christ is the mediatorial king, i.e., all of God's sovereignty is mediated through him until the end of the age (1 Cor 15). He is the One who orders and controls all things, even if most things in his watchcare are so regular in their operation that science is a great gift for uncovering this order.

These three are not the only possible patterns for thinking of the relationship between "God" and "the universe." My point, in any case, is simple: all sides often bring certain assumptions about this relationship to the table, and rule certain arguments out of order simply because they cannot see beyond their assumptions.

(2) Two views of what science is are battling to prevail in the public square. Although the two overlap, the first is more

narrowly methodological than the second. The first asserts that science is tasked with understanding as much as possible of the physical order, using the time-tested tools of careful observation, measurement, controlled experiments that can be replicated, deploying testable hypotheses that win consensus or are modified or overturned by subsequent advances, and so forth. The second view of what science is adopts all the methodological commitments of the first, but adds a philosophical commitment: science in this second view steadfastly refuses to allow into the discussion, at any level, any appeal whatsoever to anything supernatural.

In the present atmosphere, these two views of science can often be distinguished by how they respond to the best of the intelligent design arguments. While remaining rigorously scientific *within its own definition of science*, the *first* view can envisage the possibility that the proponents of intelligent design may be on to something. The best of the arguments for "irreducible complexity" attempt to introduce such mathematical rigor into *known* physical processes that they can be distinguished from the "God of the gaps" errors so egregiously common among nineteenth-century figures. These scientists may want to tread cautiously to be sure that no surreptitious "God of the gaps" arguments are being smuggled in, but they cannot see anything *necessarily* wrong with the physical world bearing witness to its Creator. At very least, the matter is worth further scientific probing. By contrast, scientists who implicitly or explicitly adopt the *second* understanding of what science is will insist that even the best arguments for intelligent design are *necessarily* unscientific. There *cannot be* any connection between scientific method and

possible implications outside the material order, as there cannot be any appeal beyond the material order to explain what takes place within that material order.

The links between this latter view and the “closed universe” of the previous point are pretty obvious. One might therefore think that everyone who adopts this second view of science is necessarily a philosophical materialist, perhaps an atheist, yet quite clearly this is not the case. Some scientists who are sincere Christians adopt this second view of science, but think that God-talk inevitably describes God’s relationship with the universe in non-scientific terms, i.e., in another dimension, or with other categories. Science and theology become alternative but mutually exclusive ways of describing reality.

The tensions intrinsic to this position are considerable, for transparently biblical Christianity insists that God has disclosed himself not only in private ways to particular individuals, but also *in the public arena of history, in the material space-time universe*. The cardinal instance, of course, is the resurrection of Jesus Christ. If a person does not accept the real but miraculous nature of this event, it is difficult to see how he or she can be a Christian at all. But if one accepts the facticity of this event as described in the Scriptures, then one necessarily allows that there are at least *some* occasions when the supernatural God interacts with the material universe in ways that transcend what science *can* treat. As Carl F. H. Henry once asked Karl Barth in an open Q & A, “Was the resurrection of Jesus Christ the sort of event that could have been recorded by contemporary news media had they been present?” If one says no, one abandons the biblical record: after all, the tomb was

empty, and the resurrected Jesus had the tell-tale wounds, was seen and touched, and ate with his disciples. If one says yes, then one abandons the second definition of science *at least in this instance*, for scientific observation could observe in principle the phenomenon of the resurrected Christ *without being able to allow it because it defies “scientific” (under this definition of “science”) explanation*. The tension is palpable. If one chooses to live with it in the case of the resurrection of Jesus, why not allow it in some other events? For obviously this argument could be extended to other great revelatory moments, and ultimately to *creatio ex nihilo* (After all, how far can any Christian reasonably push even the most speculative theories of an infinitely repeating expanding and contracting universe?).

But my point is at the moment a simpler one: Very often conflicting definitions of “science” lurk behind the intensity of our debates.

(3) Hermeneutical discussions regarding the opening chapters of Genesis often hide another set of assumptions. We might get at this challenge by thinking our way through an example. Someone might argue (Indeed, many have argued!) that the Hebrew word for “day” always refers to a solar day when it is modified by an adjectival number. So when Exodus 20 tells us that the Lord created the heavens and earth in “six days,” the nature of the day (it is argued) is settled. Let us for the moment grant the validity of this argument without further dispute or refinement. The next phase in the discussion often revolves around whether Genesis 1 is prose or poetry, with the assumption that this is equivalent to asking whether it is history or imaginative, metaphorical description. At this juncture

one encounters lengthy debates over the nature of Hebrew parallelism and its place in poetry, over the possible relation between the terminology of this passage and the terminology of other creation accounts in the Ancient Near East, including *Enuma Elish*, and so forth. But one of the possibilities is rarely probed very far. Some have argued that this description really is given in terms of solar days, that the account is very much in terms of a “creation week,” that it is wrong to think of each day being a symbol for an age (as in the “day-age” theory)—but that this does not itself mandate a young earth or a literal week-long creation, because, it is argued, the creation week is itself a creative representation of what happened with its own theological purposes, but not a “scientific” or “historical” representation of what happened.

If this argument were admitted to have any plausibility, then of course all the evidence in the world that the days of creation are solar days is irrelevant to the debate. The question of literary genre becomes far more central—and it is far more difficult to adjudicate. Sadly, its difficulty is exploited by both sides. The conservative side sometimes treats appeals to literary genre as mere excuses for unbelief; the liberal side sometimes appeals to the literary genre of Genesis 1 as if astonishing minimalism is mandated by the text itself. But once again, my point is the simpler one: on all sides of this discussion, very often hidden elements gum up the quality of the discussion.

And that brings me to my final reflection. Thirty-five years ago, Francis Schaeffer wrote a little book that I have often found useful in helping some Christians move beyond entrenched positions. That book was called *Genesis in Space and Time*

(London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1972). He asked, in effect, a simple question: What is the least that Genesis 1-11 must be saying for the rest of the Bible to cohere, for the rest of the Bible to make sense and be true? That is not the same as asking what is the *most* that one can reasonably infer from these chapters. Rather, it is one particular application of the old *analogia fidei* argument: the appeal to “the analogy of the faith” as established by the rest of the Scriptures is one crucial way to let Scripture interpret Scripture.