

“Genesis poses a huge barrier to young people who try to take seriously both the Bible and science. To complicate matters, the church presents a divided and often divisive response. This book, written by two who are committed to the integrity of both fields, offers a fresh and harmonious perspective on an issue of vital importance.”

—**Philip Yancey**, best-selling author

“As reverent, conservative, Bible-trusting Christians, Johnny Miller and John Soden enrich the meaning of God’s holy Word by showing what Genesis 1 meant when Moses wrote those words. Clearly and humbly, they walk us through the understanding of Scripture that has changed their minds away from the interpretation of Young Earth Creationism. Not everybody will agree, of course: these are deep matters. But after reading this book, surely everybody will agree that there is more than one way for those who love and obey the Bible to understand Genesis 1.”

—**Tim Stafford**, writer, *Christianity Today*

“As Miller and Soden teach us how to tell and retell the story of Genesis, they do so not only by their careful research and clear exposition of the text in its Ancient Near East context, but even more importantly, they do so by the telling of their own struggles and stories, which are then caught up into the story of the gospel. Regardless of how one feels about the arguments put forth, the love of Christ put on display is more than enough reason to read this excellent book as the authors earnestly seek to walk along the Way of the Truth that gives Life!”

—**Michael Loren Gulker**, Executive Director, The Colossian Forum

“The authors have courageously tackled a controversial and thorny issue: interpreting Genesis 1 faithfully in the light of scientific knowledge. Miller and Soden walk the reader through the interpretive issues of the Hebrew text and unveil the ancient Near Eastern background to the world of the Hebrews when Genesis was written. They maintain biblical and theological fidelity while effectively challenging young earth literalism, a view they once shared. They trust Scripture completely, while dealing honestly with God’s revelation in creation as uncovered by science. This book will be a great help for laypeople and pastors alike. I heartily recommend it.”

—**James K. Hoffmeier**, Professor of Old Testament and Near Eastern Archaeology, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

“The Church is at a crossroads and is in need of judicious advice—particularly the sort that is provided by this book. Miller and Soden have tackled the important issue of the interpretation of Genesis 1 and have sounded a clarion call for the church to recognize the importance of interpreting in light of the perspective of the ancient context and the Israelite audience. Though one may disagree with individual details here and there, the clearly written, down-to-earth investigation will challenge readers as it offers insights that will help them to confront the evidence and perhaps reconsider their views in healthy, God-honoring ways.”

—**John H. Walton**, Professor of Old Testament, Wheaton College

“Since schools no longer teach how to recognize and analyze the classical rhetorical devices, some readers assume that a simple, literal reading is sufficient to understand the Bible. Commonly, they read a passage like Genesis 1 as though it were written in English to them yesterday. And frequently, it is also assumed that the veracity of Scriptures is linked to this type of interpretation. Genesis 1, the account of God’s creation of the universe, is deserving and worthy of better interpretive efforts.

“John Soden and Johnny Miller have authored an excellent, readable book that assumes the veracity of the biblical account, as well as clearly demonstrates that sensitivity to genre, rhetorical devices, and historical literary context leads to a more accurate interpretation that is faithful to the original intention of the passage. This is a far superior reading of Genesis 1 than the simple, literal interpretation because it is aware of the Bible’s original context and is rooted in the historical, grammatical interpretation. And in the end, it gives a much better answer to the highly speculative, modern cosmologies that confront the faith today.”

—**K. Lawson Younger, Jr.**, Professor of Old Testament, Semitic Languages, and Ancient Near Eastern History, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

IN THE
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WE MISUNDERSTOOD

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*Interpreting Genesis 1
in Its Original Context*

JOHNNY V. MILLER | JOHN M. SODEN

 **Kregel**
Publications

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*To our exceptional
soul mates:
Jeanne Miller
Janet Soden*

*An excellent wife who can find?
She is far more precious than jewels.
The heart of her husband trusts in her,
and he will have no lack of gain.
She does him good, and not harm,
all the days of her life.*

PROVERBS 31:10-12

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PREFACE

During our work together on this project, we have grown in our understanding, in our convictions, and in our friendship with each other. We have been friends and co-laborers in Christ's vineyard through our fellowship in the same church for a number of years. We have shared a concern for Christian students who flounder in their faith when challenged with a scientific worldview that conflicts with Young Earth Creationism, and who do not know that there is a biblical alternative that is faithful to the text and intention of Scripture. Our shared commitment to and understanding of Scripture prodded us to join forces to write this book.

Our target audience is students and lay Christians who have a high interest in the creation account of Genesis 1:1–2:4, and who either are unprepared or unmotivated to wade through highly technical material on the subject. We have tried to make our case in terms relatively accessible to anyone willing to take a little time to understand the context and familiarize themselves with gods that are strange to us but were not strange to Israelites in the second millennium B.C. We have tried to keep more technical material in the endnotes for those motivated to pursue the study further. And we do hope many will want to do just that!

Our critics and our encouragers make us better, and we have profited

from plenty of both. We want to thank those who have contributed to our motivation and understanding during this project. Michael Murray, vice president of the Templeton Foundation, was the first to see the need and possibility of this work and encouraged us to begin. Among those with expertise in the vast area of ancient Near Eastern studies who have generously shared their thoughts and time are Lawson Younger, Gordon Johnston, and James Hoffmeier. The improvement to the work is to their credit, while any shortcomings are our responsibility.

We are grateful to the administration of Lancaster Bible College, which, under the leadership of President Peter Teague, granted sabbatical time and encouragement for our work. The points of view expressed in this book are totally ours, but the mutual respect of those who differ with us is a tribute to the oneness of the body of Christ. We have experienced that same kind of oneness among our church leaders, who represent a variety of perspectives on creation.

We each have a loving wife—Jeanne Miller and Janet Soden—who has encouraged us in our writing despite the pressures on family time. They have also read through the manuscript and suggested clarifications and improvements that have made it more readable for the less scholarly, but nonetheless committed, Christian reader.

We must also thank friends, family, students, and colleagues who have read through the manuscript and offered suggestions, clarifications, and encouragement.

Finally, we are thankful to our Lord for the privilege we have of pondering the sacred texts of Scripture, of listening to the voice of God, and of trying to make that voice plain to the people of God in our generation.

Part 1

PAST AND PRESENT ISSUES
IN INTERPRETING THE
CREATION ACCOUNT

Chapter One

ASKING THE RIGHT QUESTION

Johnny Miller's Story

The pastor really lit into me. From the pulpit. In front of everyone.

“People who don’t believe this literally, don’t believe the Bible.” He was talking about the days of creation as recorded in Genesis 1.

“My Bible says . . .” he repeated over and over. Actually, it was “My Bible says . . .” Well, it was really, “**My** Bible says . . .” And he would thump the pulpit with emphasis on “*the first day.*” Then, “*the second day.*” All the way through “*the sixth day.*”

His Bible was the New International Version. As he talked I guessed that he had never compared *his* Bible with the Hebrew Bible. But I was thankful that he believed in the authority of Scripture and the verbal inspiration of the Bible—that every word was inspired by God and therefore that there is no error in what the Bible presents as truth. I believe this too. I just wish he hadn’t been so hard on anyone who disagreed with the way he read *his* Bible.

To be fair, he didn’t know that he was being hard on me personally. My wife and I were visitors among the thirty or so worshipers in the small Wyoming church that summer Sunday morning. We were on vacation and had searched out a place to worship. I didn’t expect to be told that I was an anti-biblical, naturalistic, evolutionistic unbeliever that morning.

But I could empathize, because I was sure I had said similar things

myself. In my forty-plus years of ministry, I've served about twenty-five years as a pastor and fifteen years as an educator. For many of those years, I had exactly the same understanding of Genesis 1 as the pastor in that Wyoming church. It was obvious to me that the references to days meant twenty-four-hour days, bounded by evening and morning, and that in the context of Genesis 1–5, the chapter was referring to a creation that took place fairly recently, from 10,000 to 50,000 years ago. I had come to that conclusion through the timely influence of Henry Morris and his coauthored book *The Genesis Flood*.¹

When I graduated from Arizona State University, like many university students I was awash with doubts about the Christian faith of my childhood. I was confused about the age of the earth, the significance of geology, the authority of Scripture, and lots of other things. I had been raised in fundamentalist churches where the Bible reigned supreme—that is, our interpretation of the Bible reigned supreme. To question our interpretation of the Bible was equal to doubting God and proving you weren't really a Christian. So I kept my growing doubts to myself and just quietly backed away from a living faith.

However, the resurrection of Jesus Christ tethered me to truth. That event stood out as history, and I was a history major. I could not simply jettison history. After a couple of years of spiritual wandering, I returned to the fold and made a mature, all-out commitment to Jesus as Lord of my life. I had lots of questions, even doubts, about the Bible, but I had no doubt about who Jesus was and is.

Shortly after making this commitment, I went to graduate school to study for ministry. While I was at Dallas Seminary, Henry Morris came to speak in chapel. He and John Whitcomb had recently published *The Genesis Flood*, and what Morris said made perfect sense to me. I began to pore over creationist writings. A friend and I put together a one-day workshop on the creationist perspective, and we were invited to present it in many churches and schools over the span of a few years. I also launched out on my own and traveled broadly to speak on creationism.

The age of the earth had not been an issue for me in my youth, because the sacred Scofield Bible notes allowed for an old earth, with a lengthy time gap between the original creation (Gen. 1:1–2) and a proposed re-creation beginning in Genesis 1:3. Indeed, as far as I can discern, the current Young Earth Creationist movement really dates back to the influence of the Morris and Whitcomb publication.² But I began to believe that if you take Genesis 1 literally, then you also must take Genesis 2–5 literally, and putting these chapters together with a tight genealogy demands a young earth. That’s what I preached from the pulpit, and that’s what I taught in my apologetics courses in Bible college and seminary. I could easily have claimed, “*My Bible says . . .*”

But my perspective changed radically about fifteen years ago. One element that contributed to the change was scientific: I discovered that what I thought were watertight proofs for a young earth were highly debatable. I confronted the question of whether God would interject into the world apparent evidence of age if it would deceive people into believing the earth was old. I checked the footnotes of a handful of creationist literature, and found that many of the citations of scientific literature were taken out of context or were impossible to find. I am not a scientist; I am a theologian and a student of Scripture. But I am well acquainted with several godly scientists who love God intimately and are committed to the absolute authority of Scripture, and who also believe in an ancient creation.³ They confirmed that what I was coming to understand about science was accurate.

Please understand, science does not determine what the Bible means, nor does it determine whether the Bible is true. The latest word in science has never yet been the last word in science. The latest opinion or discovery always stands ready to be modified or discarded by a subsequent finding. Nevertheless, science, like history, can help to challenge questionable interpretations of the Bible, as it did in the days of Galileo, as we will see in the next chapter. It can force us to correct erroneous interpretations.

At the same time that I was beginning to have scientific questions

about the legitimacy of the young earth position, I was also beginning to delve seriously into the language and setting of the Genesis account itself, and that was the most eye-opening of all. I realized that all my life I had been reading Genesis from the perspective of a modern person. I had read it through the lens of a historically sophisticated, scientifically



What did Moses mean when he wrote Genesis 1? (Photo credit: Jeanne Miller, courtesy of Bethel Temple, Lancaster, PA)

influenced individual. I assumed that Genesis was written to answer the questions of origins that people are asking today.

But I had never asked the most vital question of all: What did Moses mean when he wrote this text? After all, “my Bible” was Moses’ “Bible” first.⁴ Was Moses acquainted with Charles Darwin? Or Henry Morris? Or Hugh Ross? Was he writing to discredit any modern theory of evolution? Were his readers troubled by calculations of the speed of light and the distance of the galaxies from earth? Were they puzzling over the significance of DNA? Were they debating a young earth versus an old earth? Would they have had any inkling about a modern scientific worldview? If you agree that the answer to these questions is obviously no, then the logical question is, what was on their minds? How would they have understood Genesis 1?

I have read a great deal of literature debating the meaning of Genesis 1, but rarely do the authors even ask, much less start with, the question that is the most important question of all: What did Genesis mean to the original author and original readers?

John Soden’s Story

The question of meaning is where my story intersects with Johnny’s story. In high school and college I read Institute for Creation Research literature, assumed a twenty-four-hour day, young earth perspective, and believed that someday all of our questions would be resolved. This has not been a particularly emotional issue for me, but it has held a high degree of interest. I majored in the physical sciences in college and appreciate the explanatory power of a good scientific theory with regard to the data of natural revelation. I believe that the sciences reveal God as a God of order and creativity, among other things.

As I moved into my graduate studies focusing on the Old Testament, I began to see other questions that seemed to remove the emphasis from the elapsed time of creation, and that suggested that the account in Genesis is not concerned with the timing of creation, either directly or primarily, and perhaps not even at all. It seemed to me that the text

was not written to answer the question of how long it took God to create but was concerned with the character and rule of the one who created. I began to believe that the text did not require a “seven-day, twenty-four-hour” answer to our modern question.

As my presuppositions about the text were challenged, my recognition of the conflicts between the text and science deepened. I was presented with increasingly complex issues and I also began to realize a renewed force to questions I had easily dismissed before. As Johnny has already mentioned, the questions of science do not determine the meaning or truth of Scripture, but they should cause a careful reexamination of the text and what it actually says, as opposed to what we assume it says. I do not want to believe something merely because I am told that it is true or because I assume it is true. I want to believe what God actually intended and what I am convinced he means in his Word to us.

However, as I studied the issues, I became more deeply aware of a polarization among believers and, at times, a decided lack of civility in the debates on this topic. Like Johnny, I also have been chastened, probably unknowingly, with the comment that if you do not believe in a “literal” creation (young earth and twenty-four-hour creative days), you do not believe the Bible or have the faith of Abraham. The problem is that if I do not have the faith of Abraham, I am not saved (Rom. 4:1–8)! Whether people intended to say this or not, the implications seem clear enough. Yet my greatest desire is to know, live out, and then accurately and adequately express the truth of God’s Word.

The issue at hand is not whether God *could* have created the earth in six twenty-four-hour days. Nor is the primary issue whether he *did* do it in six twenty-four-hour days. God could have done it any way he wanted. The primary issue is what Genesis 1 is intended to teach us. It is only a secondary consideration of how the meaning of Genesis 1 correlates with our conception of current scientific understanding.

That is why we’re writing this book. We have repeatedly heard that the only reason Christians would not take Genesis 1 “literally”

(assuming that means creation in six twenty-four-hour days) is if they are Darwinists, and thus are trying to change Scripture to fit their science. This is not true of us. We are not trying to accommodate either Darwinism or science. Naturalistic Darwinism is built on the triad of chance, time, and progress. The creator God of the Bible knows nothing of chance. Science tries to relate all of the data of the universe to a comprehensive understanding of how the universe came to be and works. We do not believe that Genesis 1 speaks to those issues in the same way. Instead, we believe that it is essential to read Genesis 1 as it was meant to be understood. Only after we see Genesis 1 (and the rest of God's revelation) from the perspective of both its author (in this case, Moses) and its original readers will we have the right to apply it to modern discussions (or debates) about the age of the earth and the meaning of the days of creation. We want to adjust our perspective to read the text from Moses' perspective instead of from ours; if we don't, we'll probably make the same kinds of mistakes that Bible readers made before Galileo.

Countless Other Stories

The stakes in this study are high. Not everyone raised in the church is able to reconcile their biblical understanding and the scientific claims as we did. Ronald Numbers, author of the encyclopedic *The Creationists* cited above, is Hilldale Professor of the History of Science and Medicine at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. He earned his PhD in history at the University of California, Berkeley, in 1969. He was taught Young Earth Creationism in his Seventh-day Adventist upbringing. But during his doctoral studies he became convinced that the earth was “at least thirty thousand years old. Having thus decided to follow science rather than Scripture on the subject of origins, [he] quickly, though not painlessly, slid down the proverbial slippery slope toward unbelief.”⁵

This is the silent testimony of many students who were raised in conservative churches, but who surrendered their faith during college because it seemed they had to choose between science and Scripture. Perhaps that wasn't really the choice. Perhaps the choice was between

science and a misinterpretation of Scripture, or between Scripture and erroneous science.

Perhaps a better understanding of Moses' meaning in Genesis 1 can point more people toward, instead of away from, genuine biblical faith. Is it even possible to understand Genesis as Moses meant it to be understood? Would this settle all of the debate about the age of the earth and its relevance to biblical interpretation? We will explore these questions together in the following pages.