

*A Guide to Faithfully
Reading and Understanding Genesis 1-3*

INTERPRETING EDEN



Vern S. Poythress

FOREWORD BY D. A. CARSON

“This is not the usual book on Genesis 1–3. It takes up many of the same problems other books do (such as the length of the creation days), but it expects you to think much harder about them than you were expecting to. Perhaps, for example, you might approach this book looking for arguments defending literal interpretation. Well, Poythress will tell you that the term *literal* has at least five meanings, so theses about literal versus figurative interpretation generally need more careful formulation than we usually give them. But none of these careful distinctions has the aim of compromising the inerrancy of Scripture as God’s Word. Indeed, you will emerge from this book with a greater sense of how Genesis really is the Word of God. Indeed, you will learn much about how, as Poythress says, we should ‘read the Word of God in the presence of God.’ This is how biblical and linguistic expertise ought to be used in expounding the Bible.”

John M. Frame, Professor of Systematic Theology and Philosophy
Emeritus, Reformed Theological Seminary, Orlando

“This new book by Vern Poythress is a remarkably wise and comprehensive analysis of multiple recent approaches to interpreting Genesis 1–3. Drawing on several decades of detailed biblical research, Poythress effectively answers modern views that simplistically attribute ‘scientific error’ to Genesis, and he demonstrates convincingly that Genesis 1–3 must be understood as prose narrative that purports to describe actual events, not as fictional or allegorical literature. But he also wisely cautions against ‘overinterpreting’ Genesis 1–3 by claiming that it contains scientific information that was not the intention of either its human or divine author. Highly recommended!”

Wayne Grudem, Distinguished Research Professor of Theology and Biblical Studies, Phoenix Seminary

“We always owe our thanks to Vern Poythress for his characteristic of careful and thoughtful engagement with the biblical text and with other interpreters; how much more on these texts and topics! Besides attention to linguistic details, Poythress always draws the reader to the bigger issues connected to interpretation and to the Christian worldview. This will be worth your time to read, study, consider, and digest.”

C. John Collins, Professor of Old Testament, Covenant Theological Seminary; author, *Did Adam and Eve Really Exist?*; Old Testament editor, *ESV Study Bible*

“Poythress is a genius of our time. *Interpreting Eden* tackles massively complex issues (some far more complex than I had initially thought) and points a way forward. From this point on, no interpreter of the creation narratives can avoid interacting with this book.”

Derek W. H. Thomas, Chancellor’s Professor, Reformed Theological Seminary; Teaching Fellow, Ligonier Ministries; Senior Minister, First Presbyterian Church, Columbia, South Carolina

“This is a fascinating, helpful, and well-written book. Vern Poythress has managed to engage in a meaningful way with the serious questions raised today about reading Genesis 1–3 carefully, with hermeneutical finesse, and, at the same time, has interacted with related modern scientific theories with discernment. One does not need to agree with all his conclusions to learn from his way of treating questions, discussions, and competing views fairly and with wisdom. This book helps us think more clearly and deeply about some of the issues that concern us the most.”

Richard E. Averbeck, Director of the PhD in Theological Studies and
Professor of Old Testament and Semitic Languages, Trinity Evangelical
Divinity School

Interpreting Eden

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Interpreting Eden

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Understanding Genesis 1–3

Vern S. Poythress

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Foreword

Some topics are notoriously complex, and few, if any, are more complex than the doctrine of creation. This complexity springs in large part from the wide array of disciplines that impinge on the topic: exegesis of the opening chapters of Genesis and of other biblical passages that talk about creation; questions of literary genre; hermeneutical principles; the interface between Scripture and contemporary science (with its many compartmentalized disciplines, from cosmology to thermodynamics to biology and geology); reception theory, which wrestles with the history of the interpretation of these chapters across many centuries and even more cultures; epistemology; the implications of working with God-inspired texts; the dogmatism of various theological cliques on the left hand and on the right; the nature of history; literary structure; and the place of analogy when talking about God. And that list is certainly not exhaustive, but merely suggestive.

Enter Vern Poythress. Not every New Testament scholar begins his academic career with a PhD in mathematics from Harvard or writes across an extraordinarily wide range of theological topics: baptism, science, providence, accommodation, translation theory, the Trinity, inerrancy, hermeneutics, spiritual gifts, literary genre, typology, eschatology, apocalyptic, sociology, and, of course, creation. In the more than forty years I have known him, Dr. Poythress has kept pushing back the frontiers in a widening range of important subjects; it is hard to keep up with all his work. And that is the first reason why he is as qualified as anyone, and more qualified than most, to wrestle with what the Bible says about creation: he has spent his life interacting intelligently with many of the related fields. Indeed, informed readers will find echoes of some of his earlier work in this study, as the

panoply of his previous efforts comes together in this combination of analysis and synthesis.

The second and third reasons why Dr. Poythress is the person to write this work hang together: he simultaneously espouses a very high view of Scripture and classic confessionalism. Some adopt the former but know little of the latter: they tend toward a mere proof-texting exegesis, unable to see the forest as they fasten on a knot in the third branch of the sixteenth tree from the right. One remembers the insight of Francis Schaeffer, writing forty-five years ago (in *Genesis in Space and Time*). He set out to unpack not everything he could possibly find in Genesis 1–11, but everything in those chapters that must be true for the rest of the Bible to be coherent and faithful. Dr. Poythress is not so restrictive, but he has a fine instinct for what is most important. Others loudly avow their commitment to historic confessionalism, but are either unwilling or unable to engage in careful exegesis. Dr. Poythress wants to hold these polarities together.

The fourth reason that qualifies Dr. Poythress to write this work is that, despite the complexities and subtleties of the issues, he writes with rare clarity and simplicity.

And finally, Dr. Poythress has an extraordinarily supple and creative mind. Not infrequently, scholars who have been shaped by Reformed confessionalism can manage no more than the faithful articulation of that heritage (which, of course, is no small virtue), while scholars who owe intellectual allegiance to very little can put forward many stimulating and creative proposals even while they ride right off the range. But Dr. Poythress manages to maintain the theological “thickness” of a rich tradition while venturing unafraid into many creative suggestions and postures. That is one of the reasons why it is a delight to read what he writes: I am invariably stimulated, challenged, egged on to think my way again through something I mistakenly thought I understood adequately.

That is a large part of the valuable contribution that Vern Poythress makes in this work. I read him with pleasure not because I think he is always right, and therefore doing no more than reinforcing my biases, but because as far as I can see he is far more likely to be right than not, and in any case he stimulates me to think within the matrix of profoundly Christian commitments. In a few areas, I think he is

wrong: for example, the way he sets up the weighted contributions of the divine author and the human author is bold, but finally unconvincing. But even where I think he is wrong, he teaches me to shore up my own position with more care.

Be that as it may, books that I can recommend because I agree with them have their own easy usefulness; books that I recommend because they wrestle in a highly informed and stimulating way with biblical texts, whether I agree with them or not, are even more useful. Take it up, and read.

D. A. Carson

Acknowledgment

I am grateful to the *Westminster Theological Journal* for granting permission for me to reuse articles that originally appeared there in some of the chapters of this book. I have revised these articles and sometimes rearranged pieces from them so that they would fit coherently into this book. The following articles are used:

“Rethinking Accommodation in Revelation.” *Westminster Theological Journal* 76, no. 1 (2014): 143–56.

“A Misunderstanding of Calvin’s Interpretation of Genesis 1:6–8 and 1:5 and Its Implications for Ideas of Accommodation.” *Westminster Theological Journal* 76, no. 1 (2014): 157–66.

“Three Modern Myths in Interpreting Genesis 1.” *Westminster Theological Journal* 76, no. 2 (2014): 321–50.

“Correlations with Providence in Genesis 1.” *Westminster Theological Journal* 77, no. 1 (2015): 71–99.

“Rain Water versus a Heavenly Sea in Genesis 1:6–8.” *Westminster Theological Journal* 77, no. 2 (2015): 181–91.

“Correlations with Providence in Genesis 2.” *Westminster Theological Journal* 78, no. 1 (2016): 29–48.

“Dealing with the Genre of Genesis and Its Opening Chapters.” *Westminster Theological Journal* 78, no. 2 (2016): 217–30.

“Genesis 1:1 Is the First Event, Not a Summary.” *Westminster Theological Journal* 79, no. 1 (2017): 97–121.

“Time in Genesis 1.” *Westminster Theological Journal* 79, no. 2 (2017): 213–41.

Introduction

The Need

How can we faithfully interpret Genesis 1–3?¹ There are many controversies about the meaning of the early chapters of Genesis. How do we find our way through them? Thinking about sound principles for interpreting the Bible can help set us on a solid path. That is what we will do in this book. We will focus on biblical truths that offer us a basis for sound interpretive principles. These principles, in turn, will lead to faithful interpretation of Genesis 1–3.

Many of the controversies over Genesis 1–3 have a connection with claims from modern science. Mainstream cosmologists claim, for example, that the universe developed over billions of years, while Genesis 1 says that God’s creative acts took six days. How do we deal with such discrepancies? To evaluate various scientific claims in detail would take a book in itself.² For readers whose primary question is whether Genesis 1–3 can be harmonized with modern science, let me reassure you that there are answers. But we must be patient in

1. The literary break in Genesis comes at the end of Genesis 4 rather than the end of Genesis 3, which is why C. John Collins includes Genesis 4 in his book *Genesis 1–4: A Linguistic, Literary, and Theological Commentary* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2006). We must certainly pay attention to the literary organization of Genesis. But in this book, we focus more narrowly on chaps. 1–3 of Genesis because of their theological implications and their connections with scientific claims. Collins’s book offers a supplement to this one through its inclusion of Genesis 4. See also C. John Collins, *Reading Genesis Well: Navigating History, Poetry, Science, and Truth in Genesis 1–11* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2018).

2. I try to offer a beginning in *Redeeming Science: A God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006). For up-to-date critiques of Darwinism, including its scientific weaknesses, see Michael Denton, *Evolution: Still a Theory in Crisis* (Seattle: Discovery Institute, 2016); J. P. Moreland, et al., eds., *Theistic Evolution: A Scientific, Philosophical, and Theological Critique* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017).

the process of working them out. We must be patient because we are traveling a route that involves a number of distinct issues. Some of our observations will be at odds with widespread assumptions among the elites of Western culture. Some assumptions within the prevailing cultural atmosphere need to be challenged.

Among other things, we will consider to some extent how science fits into a biblically based view of the world (see especially chaps. 1, 2, and 4). Science as a human endeavor can have some wonderful fruits. But it can also have biases and make assertions that later turn out to be untrue or not the whole truth.

Nevertheless, our focus in this book is primarily on Genesis 1–3, not on scientific claims. Why Genesis 1–3? These early chapters, and the book of Genesis as a whole, have a significant role within the whole of Scripture because they give us the beginning of history. The beginning and the end of history both have an important influence on how we understand the middle period of time, the time in which we live. Disputes in interpreting Genesis become more vigorous because some of them make a difference, maybe even a big difference, in how we construe the middle.

In a broad sense, the middle includes us, as well as almost all the events about which the Bible talks. It includes the central events of redemption—preeminently, the life, death, resurrection, ascension, and reign of Christ. The biblical account of the creation and the fall offers the largest backdrop against which we are supposed to understand the middle. But just what do the Bible as a whole and Genesis in particular say about the creation and the fall?

Creation and Fall—in the Context of Sciences

Interpreting the first three chapters of Genesis involves many kinds of questions. Within a single book, we cannot devote equal attention to all of them. There are questions about: (1) theology, such as the doctrine of creation, the doctrine of human nature, the doctrine of sin, and the meaning of human sexuality; (2) themes, such as light, order and disorder, fruitfulness, and dominion, and how these themes relate to the rest of the Bible; and (3) the relation of Genesis 1–3 to modern scientific claims. We will focus primarily on this third set of questions.

Some of the disputes in interpreting Genesis 1–3 are clearly related to modern scientific assertions about earlier phases of the development of the universe. People also look at issues connected to the standard mainstream neo-Darwinian account concerning the origin of living things. How did the present diversity in species of plants and animals come about? Was it by random processes without design or by God’s design?

We also encounter discussions about Adam and Eve. How, if at all, does the account of the creation of Adam and Eve in Genesis 2 relate to mainstream scientific claims about the origin of humanity? Was there a single original pair? In what sense were they original? Did they come from earlier hominids by natural processes?³

On each of these questions, some people are willing to reject mainstream scientific assertions and hold to their interpretation of Genesis 1–3. Others reject the biblical account and hold to their understanding of the claims of modern science. And then there are those in between, holding a number of different positions. Some people propose harmonizations between Genesis and science. Some propose to reinterpret Genesis, some to reinterpret or redo the scientific material. It is well to recognize that the dominant viewpoint among scientists is not the only one. There are various minority viewpoints, represented by qualified scientists, but these viewpoints are largely suppressed by majority voices, by active persecution, and by selective reporting in the media.

More detailed questions about science and Genesis 1–3 also have a larger context. What is the nature of science? What is the nature of the Bible? Either of these questions could lead to a whole book.⁴ In this book, we will have to be content with a short summary so that we may have space for a close look at Genesis 1–3.

Interpretive Principles

Some of these questions are difficult. Why? Taken by itself, Genesis 1–3 does not provide direct answers to all the questions that we

3. For a survey of many such questions, see Kenneth D. Keathley and Mark F. Rooker, *40 Questions about Creation and Evolution* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2014).

4. See Vern S. Poythress, *Redeeming Science: A God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006); Vern S. Poythress, *God-Centered Biblical Interpretation* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1999); Vern S. Poythress, *Inerrancy and Worldview: Answering Modern Challenges to the Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012). A more specialized supplement to the last of these is found in Vern S. Poythress, *Inerrancy and the Gospels: A God-Centered Approach to the Challenges of Harmonization* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012).

might have. But it does have something to say. How do we interpret what it says? Much depends on how we interpret any biblical passage.

To some extent, the questions become *more* difficult because sin creeps into the process of interpretation. Not all interpretations of the Bible or all interpretations of Genesis 1–3 are morally innocent. In fact, sin can creep in unawares even when we feel sincere in our desire to understand Genesis 1–3 responsibly. Sin has effects on the mind. We need to “be transformed by the renewal of [our] mind” (Rom. 12:2).

Genesis 1–3 remains the same text it has been for centuries. But the disputes do not go away. They are not being settled to everyone’s satisfaction. When disputes continue, it can be useful to attend to principles of interpretation, that is, to hermeneutical issues, in hopes of gaining more clarity and moving forward. That is what we propose to do in this book: to consider Genesis 1–3 afresh in the light of certain interpretive principles. So our focus is on the process of interpretation and its assumptions, not just on the question of what Genesis 1–3 says or its implications.⁵

In particular, within the scope of this book, we cannot definitively settle all the possible questions about Adam and Eve. Whole books have been written on that subject.⁶ It is an important subject, partly because of the way in which the beginning of the human race affects our view of what it means to be human and partly because of the specific way in which the New Testament draws a parallel between Adam and Christ (Rom. 5:12–21; 1 Cor. 15:21–22, 44–49). The parallel depends on the assumption that Adam was a real person. How can it be that we and the whole human race “died” in Adam if Adam was not actually there as the locus for this death (1 Cor. 15:22; Rom. 5:12, 16–18)?

Though we cannot present full arguments for all conclusions, we hope to make progress in providing a hermeneutical framework in which gradually to proceed toward answers.

5. For a focus on linguistic and literary principles, see Collins, *Reading Genesis Well*.

6. See Ann Gauger, Douglas Axe, and Casey Luskin, *Science and Human Origins* (Seattle: Discovery Institute, 2012); Hans Madueme and Michael Reeves, eds., *Adam, the Fall, and Original Sin: Theological, Biblical, and Scientific Perspectives* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2014). For a spectrum of views, see Matthew Barrett and Ardel B. Caneday, eds., *Four Views on the Historical Adam* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013). An important exegetical and theological contribution is found in J. P. Versteeg, *Adam in the New Testament: Mere Teaching Model or First Historical Man?* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2012).

When a lot is at stake, we must be patient both with ourselves and with others. We must acknowledge that sins in the arena of interpretation are not easy to root out—among us or among others. Every sinful human being has the temptation to read the Bible the way he wants it to speak rather than the way that it actually does speak according to the meaning and power of the Holy Spirit.

We must also be patient concerning the state of our knowledge. God has chosen to provide some answers in the Bible, but he has not given all the answers to questions about which we might be curious. Our knowledge of the societies of the ancient Near East is fragmentary. And work in science continues. Science is a “work in progress,” and we cannot always tell beforehand where there may be radical changes in interpreting evidence.

PART 1

**BASIC INTERPRETIVE
PRINCIPLES**

God

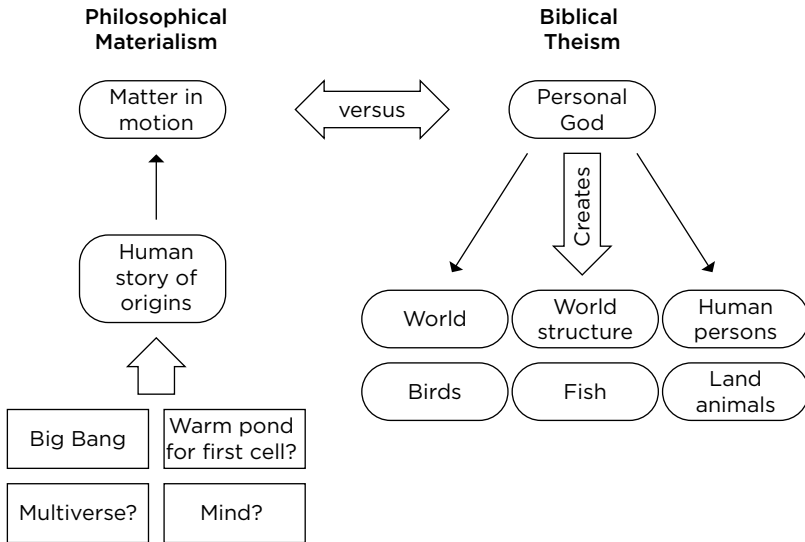
Let us begin with some basic interpretive principles.

Behind all of the particular questions about various verses of Genesis 1–3, and behind most of the interpretive issues as well, we find the question of God. Understanding who God is influences our interpretation of Genesis 1–3. In fact, the question of God is all-important for interpreting the Bible as a whole. Indeed, it is the most important question for Western civilization today. Apart from a significant minority, elite culture within Western civilization has given up on the idea that God is the Trinitarian deity described in the Bible. Education, media, and the arts travel in other directions.

One direction that is being explored is materialism or naturalism. The philosophy of materialism says that the world is composed of matter in motion. That is all that there is at the bottom of the world and the foundation of human experience. All the complexity that we see has built up gradually out of simpler constituents of matter. In particular, there is no God. Genesis 1–3 is viewed as one of many made-up stories of origins. (Note that philosophical materialism has its own story of origins. See Fig. 1.1.)

But is philosophical materialism really viable? If matter is all that there is, it would seem that our thoughts and ideas are not real. They are illusions. Some materialists do say that consciousness is an illusion. But if that is so, the ideas of materialist philosophy are also illusory. So it seems that materialist philosophy cannot give a coherent account of its own basis.

Fig. 1.1: Philosophical Materialism versus Biblical Theism



Not everyone is a materialist these days. Pure materialism seems too grim. Therefore, some people edge closer to pantheism, which says that everything is god. Though this position is “spiritual” in a sense, it radically disagrees with Genesis 1–3. It discards Genesis 1–3 or treats it as a confused reaction to the actual reality that everything is divine.

The question of God is important because God himself is important. But the question is also important because it has implications for morality and human living. What does it mean for an action to be morally right or wrong? Does morality have its root in the moral character of God? And if God exists, does he have purposes for human living, purposes that tell us who we really are?

Suppose we think that there is no God. Is morality no more than a personal, subjective preference, like regarding chocolate ice cream as better than vanilla? Is morality merely the product of mindless, unguided, random evolution? If so, it would seem to follow that everyone’s notions of morality are equally products of evolution. So the desire to help others has the same standing as the desire to steal from others. There is no real basis to consider one person’s moral preferences to be superior to another’s.

Since the question of God is important, Genesis 1–3 is important. It is one of the central texts in the Bible that tell us about God.

Who Is God?

From the standpoint of the elite in Western culture, maybe God exists and maybe he does not. But life goes on. According to this kind of thinking, life can be conducted mostly without reference to God. If someone wants to add a religious dimension in his private life, that is up to him. And, indeed, many people think of themselves as “spiritual” in some sense. They are seeking contact with something transcendent. But many of them are not really seeking the God described in the Bible. They are seeking a substitute elsewhere, in meditation, in communion with nature, in spiritualism, or in reading and listening to a host of sources.

The Bible is at odds with this atmosphere. God is at the center of its message. And God has particular characteristics. There is only one true God (Deut. 4:35, 39). And because he alone is God, it is fitting to worship him alone. He requires exclusive allegiance, by analogy with the exclusive allegiance that a man and a woman used to be expected to give to each other in marriage. This requirement of exclusive allegiance sounds oppressive to many modern people, but that is because they do not understand either God or themselves. They do not understand that they have been created for communion with God, and that such communion alone fulfills their true natures. They have lost communion through human rebellion.

So not just any idea of God and any kind of response to the transcendent is adequate. We must come to know about *this particular God* and resist the temptation to bring in all kinds of other ideas as to what we would like God to be.

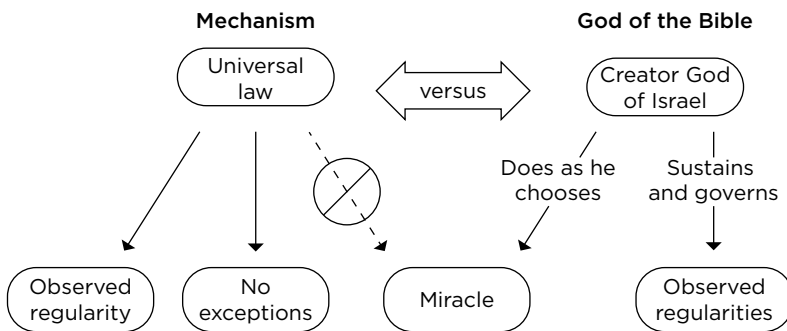
Miracles

When we actually pay attention to the Bible, we find out what it says about God. This God, it turns out, works miracles when he wishes. The four Gospels all indicate that Jesus worked miracles. And the greatest miracle was that Jesus was raised from the dead by the power of God: “But God *raised him* from the dead, and for many days he appeared to those who had come up with him from

Galilee to Jerusalem, who are now his witnesses to the people” (Acts 13:30–31). The Old Testament contains other striking instances of miracles. God appeared to Abraham in human form (Gen. 18:1–2). God rained fire and sulfur on Sodom and Gomorrah (19:24). God divided the waters of the Red Sea (Ex. 14:21). God spoke in an audible voice to Israel from the top of Mount Sinai (Exodus 19). God through Elijah raised from the dead the widow of Zarephath’s son (1 Kings 17:21–22).

Many Western people today are skeptical of such claims. But if we ask why, we soon confront the fact that Western culture has already given up on the idea of such a God *before* reading any passage from the Bible. Allegedly, “modern science” has shown that miracles are impossible. But the empirical investigations that scientists conduct can only uncover *regularities*, to which scientists give the name of “law.” They cannot rightly say that there can be no exceptions. People say that there are no exceptions because they are already influenced by a philosophy that says that God does not exist, that the world is run by mechanism, and that therefore there can be no exceptions.¹ (See Fig. 1.2.)

Fig. 1.2: Miracles according to Mechanism versus the God of the Bible



God’s Rule over All

But miracles are only the beginning of the ways in which we must reckon with God. The Bible indicates that God is intimately involved

1. For further discussion, see Vern S. Poythress, *Redeeming Science: A God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006), chap. 1.

in the events of the world. He is involved not only in extraordinary, exceptional events, but in the most ordinary events. In his sovereign rule, he controls events both big and small, both natural and human. For a thorough confirmation of the reality of God's control, readers may go to whole books devoted to the subject.² Here, we may be content to cite a sampling of verses:

You cause the grass to grow for the livestock
and plants for man to cultivate,
that he may bring forth food from the earth. (Ps. 104:14)

The lot is cast into the lap,
but its every decision is *from the LORD*. (Prov. 16:33)

But if God so *clothes the grass* of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? (Matt. 6:30)

For the Son of Man goes as it has been *determined*, but woe to that man by whom he is betrayed! (Luke 22:22)

For truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to *do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place*. (Acts 4:27–28)

We also have verses that proclaim the comprehensive character of God's control in general terms:

Who has spoken and it came to pass,
unless the Lord has commanded it?
Is it not from the mouth of the Most High
that *good and bad* come? (Lam. 3:37–38)

In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who *works all things* according to the counsel of his will. (Eph. 1:11)

2. John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2002); Loraine Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1936); Vern S. Poythress, *Chance and the Sovereignty of God: A God-Centered Approach to Probability and Random Events* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014).

Principles such as these do not appear in only one or two books of the Bible, but in many.³ They occur in both the Old Testament and the New Testament. They occur on the lips of Jesus as well as others.

This idea of the comprehensive rule of God contrasts with several alternatives that are common today. It contrasts with philosophical materialism, which believes that God does not exist. It contrasts with pantheism, which identifies the world with god (“The world is god.”). It contrasts also with deism.

Deism was a popular view in the eighteenth century. In its classical form, it postulated that God created the world but was thereafter uninvolved. This contrasts with the continuous involvement described in the Bible.

Among people who claim to be Christian, something akin to deism still exists in our time. It consists in the idea that, in most cases, created things are sufficient in themselves to develop under their own power. In other words, God is basically uninvolved in detailed development. A view of this kind does not completely deny the occurrence of miraculous intervention at key times—for example, in the resurrection of Christ. And it may affirm that God is continuously involved in sustaining each created thing *in being*. For example, it is surely correct that God sustains the existence of grass. But that is a minimal affirmation. The Bible says that “you cause the grass to grow for the livestock” (Ps. 104:14). God is causing the grass to grow, not just sustaining its existence. Or consider another illustration. The deistic view affirms that God sustains the existence of the wind and the water. Psalm 147:18 says that “he makes his wind blow and the waters flow.” This psalm depicts a far more vigorous and intimate involvement by God with specific events than what deistic views hold.

Science and Modern Deistic Thinking

In our time, deistic views are influenced by the predominance of science and its technological benefits. Science, it is thought, shows us what the world is like. And the world that it shows us is one in which most things undergo causal developments under their own power.

3. In narrative books in the Bible, the principles often reside in the background—it is assumed that the events are being worked out according to God’s purposes.

That is, our world is either a world completely without God or a deistic world, in which God mostly leaves the world to its own inner working.

But such thinking is a product not of the scientific data, but of analyzing the scientific data in a deistic way. In other words, deism is built into the implicit framework that people assume and use when thinking about science. They interpret the process of causation as self-sufficient, ignoring the presence of God working all things according to his will (Eph. 1:11). They assume self-sufficiency rather than demonstrate it. By contrast, the person who genuinely believes that God is intimately involved in growing grass and making the winds blow sees scientific data as a description of the faithfulness of God. God is so faithful in the ways in which he makes grass grow and the winds blow that we can give detailed descriptions of the regularities. Scientists at their best are merely describing some of the regular ways that God comprehensively rules the world.

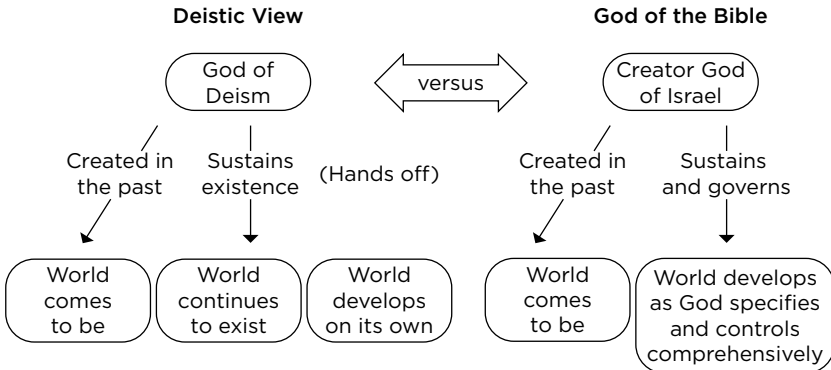
We may illustrate with an analogy. Let us suppose that a scientist undertakes to observe the patterns in my life and my wife's. Every morning we get up at about seven thirty. This pattern continues for months. So the scientist formulates a law: these people get up at seven thirty. It seems to be a perfectly sound law, with no exceptions. But then one morning we get up at five thirty. Is this a "miracle"? Our rising at this hour certainly may seem exceptional, strange, and unaccountable. But then the scientist finds out that we got up at that hour because we had an early flight to catch. Our personal purposes, which normally involve regular hours of sleep, can be overridden at any point by *other*, more specialized personal purposes that deal with a situation that is important to us and for which it makes sense to deviate from our normal behavior. So it is with God. The consistency and "normality" of his rule over all things gives us the basis for our ability to predict the future and to live normal lives in a dependable world around us. The sun rises every day. There are indeed what theologians call "secondary causes," as when one billiard ball knocks another ball and causes it to move, or when wind blows down a house (Job 1:19). God in his plan specifies these causal relations. But because God is personal, with personal purposes, the ties between his purposes and special situations can be the occasion for deviation from what we are

accustomed to see. Personal rule is different from impersonal mechanism, though people may not always easily notice the difference.

Yes, people can tell themselves the tale that the regularities found by scientists are part of an impersonal mechanism rather than an expression and display of the faithfulness of God in his rule over all. But the tale is false. And it can be shown to be false, because the regularities themselves are rational and language-like, testifying to the personal nature of the God who specifies them.

We cannot dwell on these matters without a much more expansive explanation, which belongs to another book.⁴ For the moment, we can take note of the fact that modern deistic views differ radically from what the Bible depicts about God’s involvement. (See Fig. 1.3.)

Fig. 1.3: The Deistic View versus the God of the Bible in His Involvement



The Implications of God’s Rule

What do we think? What is God like? Is he like the descriptions in the Bible? I believe so. If we do not follow the Bible, we will, in the end, be making up our own view of God.

The teachings in the Bible pose a fundamental challenge not only to individuals but to the whole of Western civilization. Western civilization was once heavily influenced by biblical teaching, but is rapidly losing that influence. Such a situation leads to the question, “Does God in fact exist, and is he the *kind* of God who rules over everything,

4. Poythress, *Redeeming Science*, especially chap. 1.

as the Bible describes?” Is he a God who “makes his wind blow and the waters flow” (Ps. 147:18)? If he is, then many things in Western civilization have to be rethought and retooled.

Such rethinking would not mean that we would *reject* everything from the present and the past. God has blessed every culture with much good (Acts 14:17). We call such blessings “common grace.” They are “common” because God gives these blessings to people all over the world, in all cultures and in all religions.⁵ But if God exists, we have to rethink what is actually good and what is a corruption or distortion of the truth. False beliefs about God and false allegiances to false gods have an effect.

True and False Religion

We may also raise the question of what God himself thinks about people’s conceptions about the spiritual realm and the realm of transcendence. The Bible has teaching about that too. It says that God detests false worship, which includes any kind of substitution of a false god or false object of worship for the true God. The Old Testament says clearly that it is detestable to worship other gods, such as Chemosh, the god of Moab, or Molech, the god of the Ammonites:

Then Solomon built a high place for Chemosh the *abomination* of Moab, and for Molech the *abomination* of the Ammonites, on the mountain east of Jerusalem. And so he did for all his foreign wives, who made offerings and sacrificed to their gods.

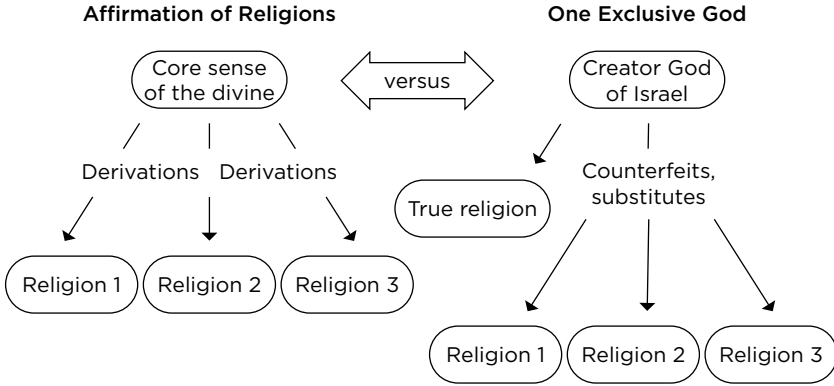
And the LORD was *angry* with Solomon, because his heart had turned away from the LORD, the God of Israel, who had appeared to him twice and had commanded him concerning this thing, that he should not go after other gods. But he did not keep what the LORD commanded. (1 Kings 11:7–10)

For all the gods of the peoples are worthless *idols*,
but the LORD made the heavens. (Ps. 96:5)

This kind of exclusive claim for the God of Israel is in sharp contrast to the modern idea that all religions are basically equal and that they all represent legitimate ways to access the divine. (See Fig. 1.4.)

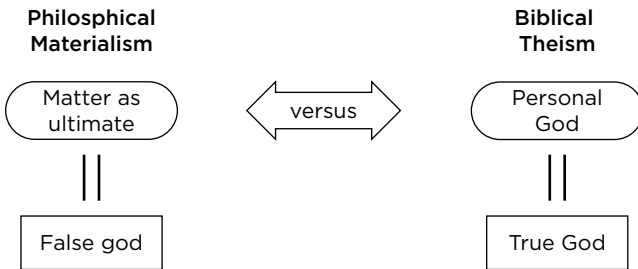
⁵ Vern S. Poythress, *The Lordship of Christ: Serving Our Savior All of the Time, in All of Life, with All of Our Heart* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 53–59.

Fig. 1.4: Affirmation of Religions versus One Exclusive God



The alternatives to worshipping the true God include modern substitutes as well as the ancient ones. The god that deism has invented is a false god. The alternatives also include cases in which people see something impersonal as ultimate. That impersonal ultimate can be nature, matter, fate, or something they desire, such as money or sex. It can be an impersonal conception of the scientific laws that govern everything.⁶ On this level of analysis, the alternatives are not religion and secularism, that is, no religion. Rather, everyone treats something as ultimate. Each postulated ultimate thing functions in place of God. At this level, everyone has a “religion.” Even the philosophical materialist has a religion when he postulates that matter is ultimate. Matter is his god. He views matter as self-sufficient and eternal, which are characteristics of God. (See Fig. 1.5.)

Fig. 1.5: What Is Ultimate?

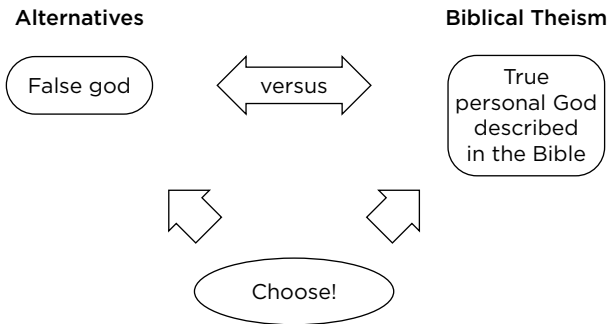


6. This view is critiqued in Poythress, *Redeeming Science*, chap. 1.

The decision confronts us in our day just as it did in the days of Joshua: whom will we serve (Josh. 24:15)? Will we serve the Lord, the God of Israel, or counterfeit gods that human imagination makes? It will not work for us to divide our allegiance:

But Joshua said to the people, “You are not able to serve the LORD, for he is a holy God. He is a jealous God; he will not forgive your transgressions or your sins. If you forsake the LORD and serve foreign gods, then he will turn and do you harm and consume you, after having done you good.” (Josh 24:19–20)

Fig. 1.6: False Gods versus True God



In sum, interpreting Genesis 1–3 depends on who we think God is. We need to interpret it bearing in mind that there is one true God, who created everything, who rules everything, and who can work miracles whenever he chooses.

“NO INTERPRETER OF THE CREATION NARRATIVES CAN AVOID INTERACTING WITH THIS BOOK.”

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