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THE FIRST WEEK:
A BELIEVING SCIENTIST READS GENESIS 1

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INTRODUCTION

Seventh-day Adventists are dedicated to sharing the good news ("gospel") of God's character of love, and His plan to rescue humans from the results of their bad choices. In Revelation 14:6, creation is identified as part of the gospel to be preached to the entire world. Thus, an Adventist interpretation of the creation account will be concerned with how the story of creation reveals the good news about God.

The Scriptures reveal that creation was a supernatural process; thus, our view of origins is shaped by the Biblical record. Genesis 1 is the principal creation passage in Scripture. Therefore, an Adventist approach to origins begins with Genesis 1. However, Scripture provides only a bare outline of the creation process, and the text seems written as a phenomenological (based on appearance), rather than a technical, description of events. This leaves numerous points in the narrative open to different interpretations.

Nature also provides information relating to origins, but this information is difficult to interpret, for at least three reasons.² Supernatural activity may be beyond our understanding. Nature has been changed by the effects of sin. Humans often choose wrong interpretations of nature. Thus, although evidence from nature must be considered, the Scriptures must be the starting point for an Adventist approach to origins. The study of nature should not be ignored, as it may help clarify some of the ambiguities in the text. Nevertheless, some mysteries remain even after consulting both Scripture and nature.

There were no human witnesses to the creation process. Only Eve was created after Adam, and he didn't get to watch; God made him unconscious for the process. (He probably did not want any advice.) Scripture is our best source for learning how it was done. Even in Scripture, however, only the barest of outlines is provided. There are numerous points in the narrative that are open to different interpretations, yet the overall picture is accessible to all. I will discuss some of the issues in the succeeding paragraphs.

1. Genesis 1:1 In the beginning God made the heavens and the earth.

When was the beginning? Although we don't know the date, we do know the world had a beginning, as attested in Matthew 24:21. We can find physical evidence for this from the existence

of radioactivity. If the earth were eternal, we would not expect to find radioactivity in the rocks. In addition, the universe has properties that seem to indicate a sudden beginning ("Big Bang"), although the Big Bang theory is rejected by some scientists.

God was present before everything or anything — before space and time. We recognize the passage of time by events in space. If there were no space, we could not observe any events, and therefore, there would be no time. So, there had to be a beginning of time and space, and God was present at the beginning.

Who is the Creator? Jesus is the Creator. John 1:1-3 states that all things were made by the WORD, identified from the context as Jesus Christ. The title "Word" describes God's power:

Isaiah 55:11 "So shall my Word be that goes forth from my mouth; it shall not return to me void, but it shall accomplish what I please, and it shall prosper in the thing for which I sent it."

Heb 1:2,3 ". . . in these last days he [God] has spoken to us by a Son, . . . through whom also He created the world. He [the Son] . . . bears the very stamp of His nature, upholding the universe by His word of power."

These texts indicate that Jesus brought the universe into existence through the power of His word.

What was created? God made "the heavens and the earth." Opinions differ on what this means. Some interpreters consider the heavens and the earth to refer to the entire universe, while others consider it to refer only to our world. At least three different interpretations have been proposed.³

- A. Some consider Genesis 1:1 to refer to the creation of a universe at some unidentified time in the past, with the creation week occurring at a later time (Gap theories).
- B. Some think Genesis 1:1 is merely an introduction to the account of creation week, and refers only to our world.
- C. Some consider Genesis 1:1 to refer to the creation of the universe during the creation week.

It does appear that our world was not the first part of the universe to be created. The creation of our world was met with singing by the "sons of God" (Job 38:4-7). These "sons of God" appear to be the representatives of other worlds (Job 1:6). This seems to imply the preexistence of other worlds, which would favor either A or B.⁴ This possibility is reinforced by physical evidence in the

form of observations of stars that appear to be so far away that their light should take millions of years to reach us.

How did God create? We are not told the physical mechanism by which God created, so we do not know how He did it. However, we are told that it was accomplished by the power of His word (Genesis 1:3; Psalm 33:6; Hebrews 11:3). Creation by command is known as *fiat* creation.

Fiat creation seems to be a crucial component of the Biblical teaching of origins. Jesus brought the universe into existence through the power of His word. This implies purpose or intent, and scientists increasingly recognize that the universe appears designed.

4. And the earth was unformed (without form) and unfilled (void), and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters.

Opinions differ on the meaning of this text.⁵

- A. Some have interpreted it to mean that the earth was created a long time ago in an act of creation not included in the creation week. It remained dark and empty of life until the creation described in Genesis. This is known as the "passive gap" theory.
- B. Others think the text refers to the brief period of time between the initial creation of verse 1 and the creation of light in verse 3.
- C. A third view ("active gap" theory) is that God would not create a world in chaos, so the world must have become "without form and void" after a previous creation.

Proponents of each of the first two views may claim support from different statements by Ellen White, but the issue appears to remain unresolved. The third view is not supported by the text, and will not be further considered here.

Why would God create the earth incompletely formed? Surely He could have created it instantaneously, in one moment, completely filled. Instead, He created in a series of steps, occupying six days. I don't claim to know the mind of God on this point, but I am impressed with one implication of the creation story: God had a plan. The careful, step-by-step creation sequence indicates a thoughtful choice by the Creator. First the earth was prepared to support life, then it was filled with living creatures. The process was orderly and purposeful.

Some interpreters⁶ have proposed a structure in the narrative: in the first three days, the "earth" was "formed" in order to support life, then in the second three days it was "filled." A parallel is seen between Day 1 (light) and Day 4 (sun); between Day 2 (atmosphere) and Day 5 (flying animals); and between Day 3 (dry land and plants) and Day 6 (land animals). However, the parallel seems to me to be rather imperfect (e.g., the seas were formed on Day 3, and filled on Day 5), which indicates

that the structure of the narrative was based on the actual sequence of events, not artificially rearranged to fit the parallelism.

FORMING THE WORLD: PREPARATION FOR LIFE

DAY⁷ 1: And God said, Let there be light, and there was light.

On Day 1, light was provided for the Earth. We do not know how the light was provided. There are at least three possibilities.⁸

- A. The light provided on Day 1 was the light of God's presence. The sun did not exist until Day 4, when God created it.
- B. The light provided on Day 1 came from the sun. The sun was created with the Earth, "in the beginning."
- C. The light provided on Day 1 came from some other source, such as a supernova or other astronomical event.

Proponents of the first interpretation may refer to Biblical texts where light comes from God (e.g., Isaiah 60:20; Revelation 21:23; Revelation 22:5). On the other hand, the second interpretation may be supported by the reference to evenings and mornings of each day (e.g., Genesis 1:5), and Ellen White's statement that the days of creation "were marked by the rising and setting of the sun."⁹ The third possibility has not been examined seriously, but is mentioned to remind the reader that God has methods of which we may be unaware. All three interpretations seem consistent with the teachings of Scripture. This question is discussed further under Day 4.

DAY 2: And God said, Let there be a firmament in the midst of the water, and let it separate the waters from the waters. And God made the firmament and separated the waters which were under the firmament from the waters which were above the firmament. And it was so. And God called the firmament Heaven.

On Day 2, the "firmament" or "heaven" was created. This is identified as the place between the layers of water, which we suppose to be the earth's surface waters and the clouds. These are separated by the atmosphere, which was created on the second day.

Some would say "heaven" refers to the entire starry expanse, because the sun was "in the firmament." However, the text may be understood as a phenomenological description, so that the sun appeared in the same region where the birds fly. The existence of other worlds preceding our own (Job 38:4-7) would seem to favor the reading that the "heavens" refer to a more restricted area. It seems unnecessary to suppose that the entire universe separates our oceans from a watery shell "above the firmament."

Some others have claimed that the reference to "firmament" means the Hebrews believed the earth was a flat surface, supported by pillars and covered by a metallic dome. They then claim this invalidates the creation account because we now know that the earth is not covered with a metallic dome. However, this seems a *non sequitur*. Regardless of what the Hebrews thought about the structure of the earth, the surface waters and the clouds appear separated by the atmosphere, and it seems reasonable that it was the atmosphere that was created on the second day.¹⁰ Note that God called the firmament "heaven."

DAY 3A: And God said, "Let the waters under the heavens be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear." And it was so. God called the dry land "Earth," and the waters that were gathered together he called "Seas."

On Day 3, the surface waters were gathered together to form the "seas" and expose the dry land, which God called the "earth." Notice that "earth" here refers to the ground, not to the entire planet. Heaven, earth and the seas (cf. Exodus 20:11, Revelation 14:7) are now formed and prepared for living organisms. Now they will be filled.

THE "FILLING" OF THE WORLD

DAY 3. And God said, "Let the earth put forth vegetation, plants yielding seed, and fruit trees bearing fruit in which is their seed, each according to its kind, upon the earth." And it was so.

Vegetation was created on Day 3. Notice here that there were various kinds of fruit-bearing trees, each having its own kind of fruit with its own kind of seed inside. Some have proposed that three types of plants are here mentioned: "vegetation"; "plants yielding seed"; and "fruit trees." Others hold that "vegetation" is merely a general term, and only two types of plants are intended.

Neither interpretation seems to have any theological significance.

The phrase "after its kind" appears here for the first time. This phrase has often been interpreted as a divine command to produce offspring similar to the parents. However, there is no hint here of such a command. While we can easily observe that offspring resemble their parents, the Bible does not record any divine command that they must do so. In this text, "according to their kind" could mean "each having its own kind of seed." Thus the offspring of one type of plant could be distinguished from the offspring of other types of plants. Incidentally, it seems that the Hebrews did not consider plants to have life, thus they probably did not consider plant "death" to have moral significance.

DAY 4. And God said, "Let there be lights in the firmament of the heavens to separate the day from the night; and let them be for signs and for seasons and for days and years, and let them be lights in the firmament of the heavens to give light upon the earth." And it was so. And God made the two great lights, the greater light to rule the day, and the lesser light to rule the night; he made the stars also.

There has probably been more controversy over the events of Day 4 than over any other event of the creation week. At least three different interpretations have been proposed.¹¹

- A. The sun and moon did not exist until Day 4. Prior to that time, light was provided by God's presence above the earth. Evening and morning were produced as the earth rotated under God's presence.
- B. The sun and moon existed before Day 4, but were obscured by thick dark clouds. The clouds were cleared up somewhat on Day 1 to provide light, but the sun itself was not visible, much as the sun is not visible on a cloudy day. On Day 4, the sun and moon became visible for the first time.
- C. The sun and moon existed before Day 4, and may have been visible on all the days of creation. On Day 4, they were appointed "to be for signs and for seasons."

The text does not seem to specify which interpretation is correct. We really don't know the answer. In any case, God is the creator of the sun and moon. An event occurred on the fourth day of creation that resulted in the sun and moon becoming established to mark off units of time, and to serve as warning signs as God determined.

Were the stars created on Day 4? The text does not specify the time of creation of the stars. At least three interpretations have been proposed for the statement referring to the stars:

- 1 The stars were created on Day 4;
- 2 The stars also were created by God, without respect to the time of their creation;
- 3 God created the moon to "rule the night with the stars."¹²

The lack of punctuation marks in the original Hebrew text leaves the text somewhat ambiguous. The visibility of stars more than 10,000 light years from our planet appears to favor B or C.

DAY 5. And God said, "Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the firmament of the heavens." So God created the great sea monsters and every living creature that moves, with which the waters swarm, according to their kinds, and every winged bird according to its kind. And God saw that it was good. And God blessed them saying, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth."

This text refers to the filling of the waters and the air with living creatures. Again, notice the term "after its kind." The text says nothing about reproduction, only that God created them "according to their kinds." "According to their kinds" could probably be translated as "of many different kinds" (e.g., TEV). This interpretation indicates that biodiversity was present from the beginning of life in the waters and in the air. There is no hint here of creation of a single ancestor to produce biodiversity through evolutionary change.

Notice also that the birds and sea animals were to reproduce and fill the available habitat. It is not stated whether reproduction would continue when the earth was filled. With the divine purpose fulfilled, reproduction might have ceased. If so, there would be no need for death. If reproduction were to continue, death would have been necessary. Based on the revelation of God's will for the new earth in Isaiah 11 and 65, and in Revelation 21 and 22, I think death was not a part of the original creation, at least not the death of terrestrial vertebrates, although there are different opinions on this question. In any case, the present ecological system seems an unreliable basis for forming conclusions about ecological systems in a sinless world.

DAY 6A. And God said, "Let the earth bring forth living creatures according to their kinds: cattle and creeping things and beasts of the earth according to their kinds. And it was so."

At this time the land surface ("earth") was populated with living creatures. Again, the beasts were "of various kinds." Different types of creatures were created simultaneously and substantial biodiversity existed from the beginning. Nothing is said of biodiversity evolving from a single ancestral form, although the Hebrew language is capable of expressing such an idea.

DAY 6B. Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth."

This passage is the logical foundation for much of the teachings of Scripture. Humans are unique among all of creation. Only humans were created in God's image. Only humans were given dominion over nature, with the responsibility to govern it wisely. The Bible emphasizes the distinct nature of humans over against the other animals. The uniqueness of humans, especially the mind, has also been noted by scientists.

DAY 6C. "And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food."

Vegetation was created to be a source of food for the animals and humans. Nothing is said of predation here, which is another reason I favor the idea that reproduction would cease when the earth was filled, and there would be no need for death.

At this point, the Earth was formed and filled. Each act of creation had prepared the way for the next. God's purpose in creation can be seen: the creation of man and woman in God's image. The culmination of the creation story, the establishment of the Sabbath, is described in Genesis 2:2-3.

THE FELLOWSHIP OF GOD AND HUMANS

DAY 7: And on the seventh day God finished his work which he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all his work which he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all his work which he had done in creation.

Creation was not complete until the Sabbath was created — a day of fellowship of God and humans. This may be the reason God created in six days rather than instantaneously. By establishing a seven-day cycle, with the seventh day as a day of communion and worship, God indicated His purpose in creating — He wanted fellowship with us. Throughout the narrative, Genesis indicates a plan is being followed. God has a plan — fellowship with us. That plan has been interrupted by sin, but it will resume when the earth is made new.

BIBLICAL CREATION: GOOD NEWS

Revelation 14:6 portrays an angel proclaiming the gospel, saying "worship Him who created." Why is Biblical creation part of the good news of Revelation 14:6?¹³ What elements of the story are especially important in showing that God is a loving Creator?

Consider the depressing story about our origins that many people believe. According to this story, humans are the product of a long history of competition and survival of the fittest. We are merely the latest in a series of animal species, each species more intelligent and better adapted than the previous one. Every species, including our own, is doomed to extinction as environmental changes favor the survival of new species. Many scientists who accept this theory have concluded there cannot be a loving God as portrayed in the Bible. This may be one reason so many scientists are skeptical of Christianity.

Many Christians are unwilling to accept all the implications of the evolutionary theory, and attempt to modify it to make it more palatable. They propose that evolution is the process chosen by God to create. Unfortunately, this makes the situation even worse. Instead of no God at all, an evil god is postulated.¹⁴ The theory of theistic evolution proposes that predation, death, and suffering have gone on for millions of years before there were any humans who could sin. Death, rather than an enemy to be destroyed, is a force for improvement. Those who advocate this theory are forced to claim that the God of the Bible chose to structure His creation on the basis of competition, so that the weak would be destroyed by the strong. In this view, it is not man, but God who is responsible for death and suffering. This is not good news to those who are hoping for a better life in the new earth.

Some people may attempt to justify God's use of death by claiming that death is not truly evil. Animal suffering and death is allowed for a higher good. Humans do not really die, but our immortal soul lives on in another realm. An immortal soul adds further problems to the question of God's goodness. A soul that could not die, but who chooses rebellion against God, would be an eternal problem. Given such circumstances, it might well seem reasonable to consign such a "soul" to spend eternity in hell, as many Christians propose. The idea of God tormenting His enemies for eternity is not good news to those who value freedom of choice. Such an idea is irreconcilable with the God of love revealed in Scripture and in the life of Jesus Christ.

As we realize the full implications of the theory of theistic evolution, we can see why the Biblical story of creation is such good news. First, it is good news to know that the Creator God has absolute power over nature, as demonstrated in creation by *fiat*. Because God has unlimited power, we can trust Him to lead in our lives. We can pray to Him, knowing that He is able to intervene if it is for the best. If creation had been accomplished through long ages of gradual, step-by-step changes, how could we have confidence in God's ability to intervene in our lives? It is good news that God created by *fiat*.

Creation of humans in the image of God is part of the good news. Our creation in His image establishes a special bond between ourselves and God. This special bond explains why God would be interested in rescuing us from the results of our bad choices. If we were merely intelligent animals, the product of long ages of gradual change, why would God place a special value on us? It is good news that we were created in the image of God.

At the end of creation week, God pronounced the world "very good." This is an important part of the good news about God, because it shows that He did not create the world in its present condition. God's will for nature is described in such texts as: Isaiah 11:6-9; Isaiah 65:17-25; Revelation 21:1-4; Revelation 22:1-5. Death and pain, predation and conflict, will be abolished, and a peaceable kingdom established.

But what if the world is evolving toward a better state? If the world is becoming better, it goes without saying that it began very badly. A bad start is not good news about God. It is good news that God gave our world a good start, and will restore it to a good condition, as soon as it is possible without violating our freedom of choice.

The good news includes other ideas from Genesis 1-11. The seventh-day Sabbath is a weekly reminder of our origins, and our relationship to the loving Creator. It is a symbol of faith in God's creative power. The Sabbath is also part of the good news.

The story of our moral fall is an important part of the good news. Our moral fall explains why our existence is so filled with misery, suffering and death. God values freedom of choice, and hence gave us the power to choose good or evil, and to experience the results of our choices. Death and other evils came about because of our own choice, not because God is evil by nature. God wishes to rescue us from our misery, and has provided a loving plan to redeem us. It is good news to know that God is not evil, and that He will remove evil from the universe.

The Flood shows that God is willing and able to intervene, and that wrongs will be corrected. This gives us confidence that God will intervene to eliminate evil and its results. This also is good news.

CONCLUSION

In the view presented here, the story of our origins is a vital part of our understanding of ourselves and our world. Although many details of creation are not well understood, the Genesis story of origins provides the logical foundation for the gospel. Both science and Scripture contain many mysteries, but we can see enough to understand that the creation is the result of intentional, supernatural action by a loving Creator, and we can share this good news with others.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Based on a lecture presented at the 23rd Faith and Learning Seminar, University of Eastern Africa, Nov 22-Dec 4, 1998. Sources cited here are restricted to Adventist authors. The entire literature is vast. An Adventist paper addressing many of these points from a different viewpoint is: Herr, Larry G. 1982. Genesis One in historical-critical perspective. *Spectrum* 13(2):51-62. A list of references on the meaning of Genesis, written by Adventist theologians, can be found at http://www.grisda.org/resources/ref_theosda.htm.
- 2 Each of these points is affirmed by Ellen White. One particularly interesting passage is *Testimonies*, Volume 8, pages 255-261.

- 3 Andreasen, N-E. 1981. The word "earth" in Genesis 1:1. *Origins* 8:13-19. For a discussion of the entire verse, see Hasel, Gerhard F. 1971. Recent translations of Genesis 1:1, a critical look. *Bible Translator* 22:154-167.
- 4 Ellen White states clearly there were other worlds in existence before the creation of our world (e.g., *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 41).
- 5 Widmer, Myron. 1992. Older than creation week? *Adventist Review* 169(August 13):4.; For a discussion of the term "Spirit of God", see: Krautschick, Simon. 1994. The definiteness of the construct chain 'Ruach Elohim' in Genesis 1:2. M.A. Thesis. Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan.
- 6 For example, see (a) Weiss, H. 1979. Genesis, Chapter One: A theological statement. *Spectrum* 9(4):54-62; (b) Davidson, R.M. 1987. The theology of creation. Unpublished manuscript of talk presented July 17, 1987, to Geoscience Field School for NAD Teachers, Brianhead, Utah.
- 7 The meaning of the word for "day" has been controversial. A good analysis is: Hasel, G.F. 1994. The "days" of creation in Genesis 1: Literal "days" or figurative "periods/epochs" of time? *Origins* 21:5-38.
- 8 Herr, Larry G. 1985. Why (and how) was light created before the sun? *Adventist Review* 162(November 21):8-9. See also pp 315-318 in Roth, A.A. 1998. *Origins: Linking science and Scripture*. Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing.
- 9 White, Ellen G. *Testimonies to Ministers*, p. 135-136.
- 10 A different viewpoint is given in Herr, 1982 (see Endnote 1).
- 11 See references in Endnote 8.
- 12 A good case for this interpretation is given in: House, Colin L. 1987. Some notes on translating ["and the stars"] in Genesis 1:16. *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 25:241-248.
- 13 See Baldwin, J.T. 2000. *Creation, Catastrophe and Calvary*. Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing.

- 14 See: (a) Gibson, L.J. 1992. Theistic evolution: Is it for Adventists? *Ministry* 65(1):22-25;
(b) Terreros, M. 1996. The Adventist message and the challenge of evolution. *Dialogue* 8(2):11-14.