Can the Bible be Taken Literally?

And there was evening and there was morning, one day. ~ Genesis 1:5

SINCE THE MIDDLE of the nineteenth century, there has been a ferocious battle between supporters and debunkers of a literal interpretation of the entire Bible. The most well-known battles have been fought over whether creation really occurred in the manner described, and whether Adam and Eve really existed or humanity was merely a product of gradual evolution from human-like animals.

Fundamental Principles

Before beginning to discuss specifics, the Catholic understanding of the literal truth of the Bible must be clearly explained. It is Catholic doctrine that God is the principal author of all of Sacred Scripture, but that the human authors inspired by God used their own capabilities and powers, and wrote within their own limitations, as true authors of what God wanted written. Since God is the source of all truth, indeed Truth itself, Scripture teaches us the truth. "Since therefore all that the inspired authors or sacred writers affirm should be regarded as affirmed by the Holy Spirit, we must acknowledge that the books of Scripture firmly, faithfully, and without error *teach that truth which God, for the sake of our salvation, wished to see confided to the Sacred Scriptures*"[1] (CCC 107; italics added).

It is essential in reading any part of Scripture to learn what each human author intended to write, and to understand as completely as possible the cultures in which its authors lived and the usual ways that each culture felt, spoke, and narrated events. Thus we should not regard Sacred Scripture as a textbook on science, as a manual on botany and zoology, or as a comprehensive history of Palestine. It is, rather, a composite of literary types, ranging from ancient family stories to royal chronicles, from allegory to drama, from prophecy to poetry, from regulations for worship to detailed laws regulating society, from sublime prayer to practical rules for living.

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Jesus raising Jairus' daughter

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It is equally essential to interpret Sacred Scripture in light of what God wanted to reveal. The Church has spelled out how this is to be done. First, the reader must regard the Bible as a single book, the unity of God's plan centered on the person of Jesus (see CCC 124). Every part must be read in light of the whole, and the whole is illuminated and made plain by the entirety of Jesus' saving work. Second, the reader must interpret Scripture in light of the Church's living Tradition. "Sacred Scripture is written principally in the Church's heart rather than in documents and records, for the Church carries in her Tradition the living memorial of God's Word" (CCC 113). The authority granted by Christ to his Church ensures that the Church will not err in interpreting Scripture, and Catholics are bound to submit to the authority of the Church in seeking the meaning of any part of Scripture. Third, the reader must pay close attention to the "analogy of faith," that is, the unity and harmony of all the truths of the faith among themselves.

The Fathers of the Church

[1] *Dei Verbum,* 11

have always taught that Sacred Scripture can be understood in four ways, or senses, the literal sense and three spiritual senses. All the spiritual senses are based on the literal sense, which is discovered by exegesis (close study following rules of sound interpretation). The three spiritual senses are the allegorical (that is, how events are significant in relation to Christ) (see handout on Typology for a more detailed discussion of the allegorical sense of Scripture), the moral (that is, the way that Scripture leads us to good and just behavior), and the anagogical (that is, the eternal significance of events and realities).

The Good Shepherd, the Blessed Virgin Mary, and Noah with a dove symbolically represented, 3rd century frescoes in the catacombs near Rome

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Creation

Most Christians understand that the story of creation found in the Bible (see Gn 1:1-31) was not intended by its human author (who is, by tradition, Moses) as a scientific description of events no one could possibly have witnessed. Instead, the book of Genesis, as the inspired Word of God, teaches us in poetic language that God exists (see also 2 Mc 7:22-23, 28)), that he is a real and personal Being (see also Col 1:15) who is eternal (see also Rom 16:26), that he created everything from nothing by the force of his will alone, and that the universe he created has order and purpose (see also Wis 11:20). The story of the "six days of creation" is a patterned sequence that, in poetic form, expresses this order and the hierarchical structure of creation. It is not necessary to see each day as a 24-hour period from sunset to sunset (and the creation of the sun is not described, in any case, until the fourth day).

The story of creation in the book of Genesis is only the beginning of God's progressive Revelation of himself and his plan of salvation to humanity, through his Chosen People, the Israelites. Through a series of covenants, through the creation of a common worship, through prayer and prophecy and law and chastisement, the one God taught the world the mysteries of himself, of our origin and fall from grace, and of our restoration to his friendship.

The Creation of Humankind and the Fall of Adam and Eve

There are various ways to understand the story of creation of human beings and the sin of our first parents found in the second and third chapters of the book of Genesis. It is not a fantastic story or mere myth that has no bearing on the reality of what actually took place but, instead, a story that is told through symbols, which therefore must be understood accordingly.

However the human body came into existence — whether it was a special creation or through a slow evolution from human-like ancestors guided by God — God endowed humans with an immortal soul and called us to share in his own life. This is expressed symbolically by the description of Adam's creation: *"the Lord God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being"* (Gn 2:7). Man is "the only creature on earth that God has willed for its own sake"[2] (CCC 356). Each of us is a person — a someone, not a something — capable through the power of grace of self-knowledge, self-mastery, and the freedom to give himself or herself to others and enter into communion with others. We alone are called

[2] *Gaudium et Spes*, 24 § 3

to have faith in and to love God; we alone have an eternal destiny.

The Church teaches that we have a single set of first parents. The names of our first parents are symbolic: "Adam" seems to mean "man" and, perhaps, "earth." "Eve" seems to mean "life" or "life-giver" (the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible called the Septuagint used the Greek word Zoë, that is, "life," for Eve's name).

The story of Adam's creation alone, and of the creation of woman, are also deeply symbolic. *"Then the Lord God said, 'It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him'"* (Gn 2:18). God tells us that we are made for each other; that we are meant to be a community of persons, and that men and women are complementary, partners to each other. Eve's creation "from Adam's rib" (see Gn 2:22), and Adam's joyous response — *"This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh"* (Gn 2:23) — gives us an understanding of the wonder they experienced in each other in their state of "original unity" and "original justice" before they sinned against God. They were happy, free from suffering, illness, and the threat of death, and in daily communion with God (see Gn 3:8). They lived in complete harmony with nature and had complete self-mastery.

We must also understand that Adam and Eve were tested by God. God had given humankind free will, so that we might freely return the love that God had given to us in making us. Our first parents were required to obey one, and one only command: not to eat of the fruit of one specific tree in the Garden of Eden (see Gn 2:17). Who knows whether it was an apple, or some other kind of fruit? It doesn't matter. The *"tree of the knowledge of good and evil"* (Gn 2:17) symbolizes our dependence on our Creator and our subjection to moral laws that govern our freedom.

Although the book of Genesis isn't specific about the identity of the "serpent" who tempted Adam and Eve (see Gn 3:1-5), our understanding that it is Satan himself, the fallen angel, is confirmed in the book of Revelation, which calls him *"that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world"* (Rv 12:9). Satan began with a leading question — asking whether God had forbidden Adam and Eve from eating the fruit of *any* tree in the Garden (see Gn 3:1) — and then actually lied, telling them that what God said about the consequences of eating of the fruit of *one* tree was not true (see Gn 3:4). He then went even further, telling them that God had forbidden the fruit of this one tree because, if they ate it, they would be *"like God"* (Gn 3:5). And they, in their pride and urge to believe Satan rather than the God who had given them everything, disobeyed God's command (see Gn 3:6). They wanted to achieve what God had intended for them all along — but by doing it their way, not his way. They preferred to reject God and to seek themselves instead. *And all human sinfulness springs from this same impulse.*

Adam and Eve plunged themselves and their descendants out of communion with God into a fallen world. They were cut off from God (see Gn 3:24), their relationship with each other became one of distrust, recrimination, and domination (see Gn 3:12-13, 16), and suffering, disease, and death entered the world (see Gn 3:16-19). They lived in disharmony with each other and with nature, and humanity quickly descended into a cesspool of sin (see Gn 4:8; Gn 6:5). There was absolutely nothing they could do to undo the terrible effects of their sin, but God, in his great mercy, promised them a Savior (see Gn 3:15). These are the truths that the book of Genesis teaches us.

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The Theory of Evolution

Scientists have propounded numerous theories that try to reconcile scientific discoveries with the story of creation in Sacred Scripture. It is not possible to go into all the aspects of this theological warfare, but it needs to be understood that the Catholic Church has established some very specific rules to address this issue.

First, we need to understand that God is the author of truth. What we learn through scientific discovery — the laws by which God governs the material universe, the geological history of the earth, the genetic code governing all living beings, the ways that species develop, flourish, and vanish — cannot contradict their Creator. Man, a creature, does not create but merely discovers truth.

Second, we need to recognize that science has proceeded haltingly and that the process of discovery never ends. Many times, science has had to revisit its theories and discard those that are incompatible with new discoveries. Scientists rightly glory in the "scientific method," but rarely discuss its essential premise, which is that scientific theory stands only so long as it cannot be proven false. Furthermore, theories for which no way can be devised to test whether they are true or false are not scientific theories at all.

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Third, we need to realize that science cannot discover everything. Science can look at "what" and "how" and "when" and "where" and, sometimes, "who," but it cannot address the biggest question of all: "why." Science is not designed to answer questions of purpose and meaning, and attempts by individual scientists to do so fail. Some scientists, unwilling to admit that science cannot discover all the answers, resort to rejecting purpose and meaning. This is emphatically contrary not only to Catholic doctrine but even to common sense.

Fourth, those who have sought answers to questions of purpose and meaning by use of human reason alone often fail to discover the truth. In human history, there have been many different ways of understanding the origins of the universe, of humanity, of good and evil. The Church teaches that, while unaided human reason can know that God exists and that he is the Creator of all things, it is unable to come to knowledge of all the truths needed for our salvation, and that we therefore need divine Revelation.

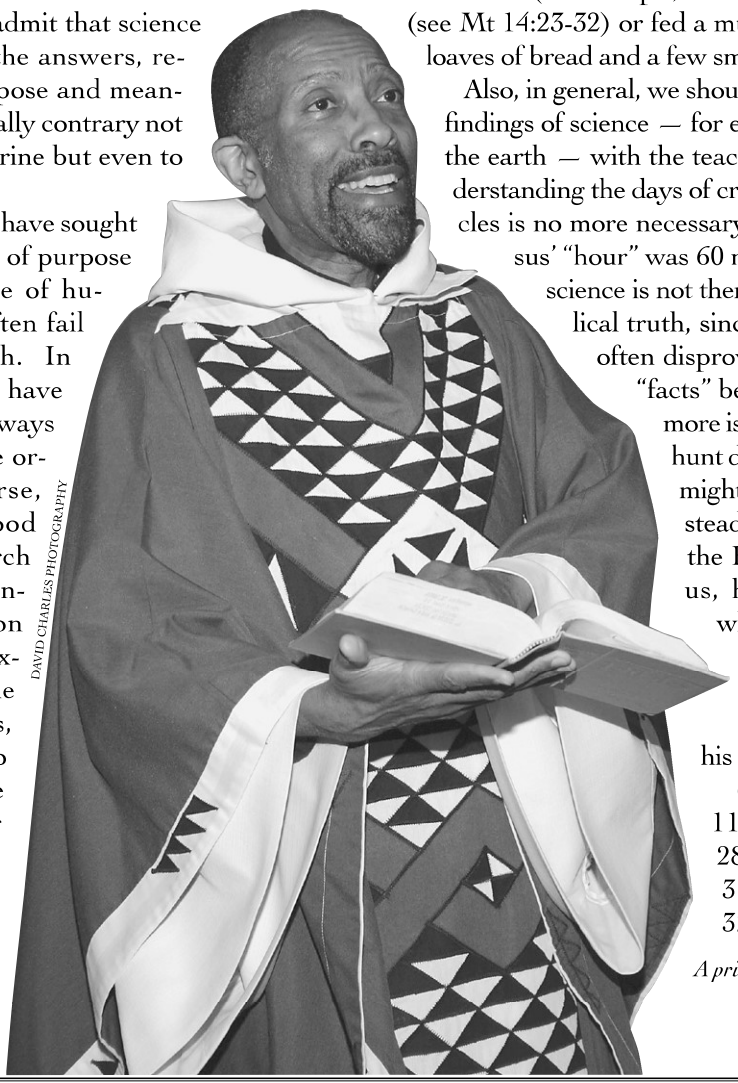
Any explanation or theory of creation, including evolution, can be believed, provided that these truths are not denied. Thus, it is acceptable to see creation of the universe and of humankind as having taken place over a long period of time. It is not acceptable to deny the existence of God as Creator of everything, to see creation as meaningless, to deny the dignity of each human person, or to see humanity as having an accidental or purposeless existence.

When and How Can the Bible be Taken Literally?

As a general principle, the Bible should be taken literally unless there is obvious reason not to do so. Failure to understand how something could be so is not one of these obvious reasons, since God, the Creator of the universe, can suspend the laws of physics whenever he chooses (for example, when Jesus walked on water (see Mt 14:23-32) or fed a multitude with only a few loaves of bread and a few small fish (see Mk 8:1-9)).

Also, in general, we should seek to harmonize the findings of science — for example, the great age of the earth — with the teachings of the Bible. Understanding the days of creation as six 24-hour cycles is no more necessary than thinking that Jesus' "hour" was 60 minutes long. However, science is not therefore the arbiter of Biblical truth, since scientific theories are often disproved and many scientific "facts" become less factual when more is learned. We should not hunt down ways we think God might have "lied" to us, but instead should read and study the Bible as God's words to us, his beloved creatures, whom he wishes to know the truths we need to seek him, find him, and share eternity in his glorious presence.

(CCC 106-107, 109-119, 124, 128-130, 283-289, 296, 299, 337, 356-357, 362, 371-372, 374-379, 390, 396-401)



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A priest preaches from the Sacred Scriptures at Mass