

LESSON 3

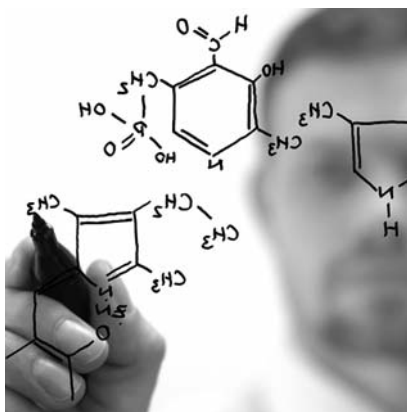
“AND THE EARTH...”

Let's continue exploring God's two revelations—the words of the Bible and the record of nature. The scientific method can help keep us on course. Now you may be wondering, “Why should we concern ourselves with the scientific method in a Bible study?”

Good question.

Many people don't realize that the steps scientists use to analyze and interpret natural phenomena grew out of the Reformation-era principles of good Bible interpretation.

Though the wording and number of steps may vary slightly from one science textbook to another, the basic components of that method include these:



1. Identify the frame(s) of reference or point(s) of view.
2. Determine the initial conditions.
3. Perform an experiment or observe the phenomenon; record what takes place when, where, and in what order.
4. Describe the final conditions.
5. Form a hypothesis about the how and why of the phenomenon.
6. Test the hypothesis with further experiments or observations.
7. Revise the hypothesis accordingly.

While these steps don't guarantee objectivity and accuracy, they can help minimize personal bias and the influence of prior assumptions.

Because of human limitations, our interpretations inevitably fall short of perfection. Students of Scripture and of nature must always be willing to adjust and fine-tune their understanding as new data is discovered. However, if the words in the Bible seem to clash with God's expression of Himself in nature, one need not debate which is in error. One must simply dig deeper to better understand both.

OPEN FOR DISCUSSION

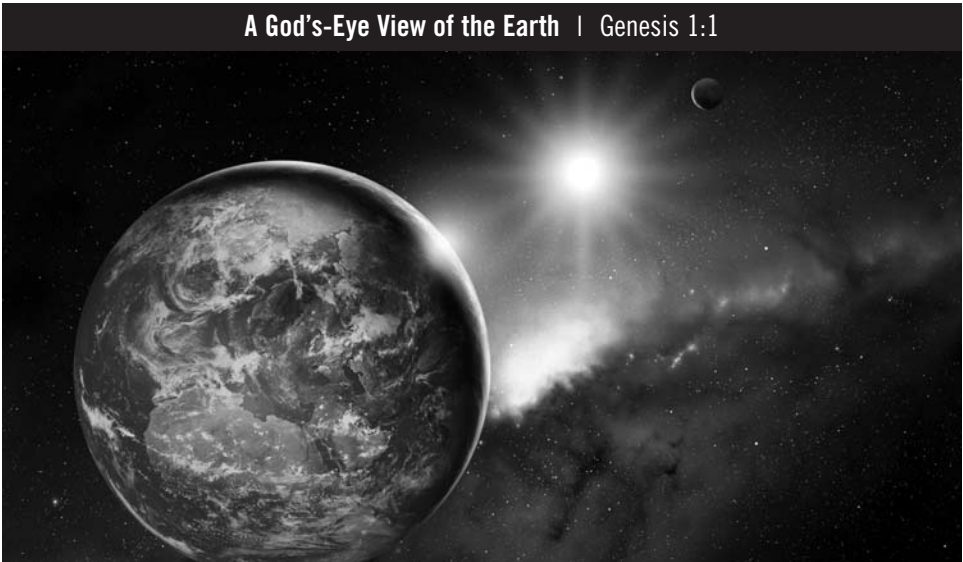
1. Do Christians show a lack of faith when they want to investigate the historical or scientific claims of the Bible?
2. Do you think what scientists discover about the natural world is as reliable and trustworthy as the information in the Bible? Why or why not?

SCRIPTURE DISCUSSION

Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. Genesis 1:2 (NIV)

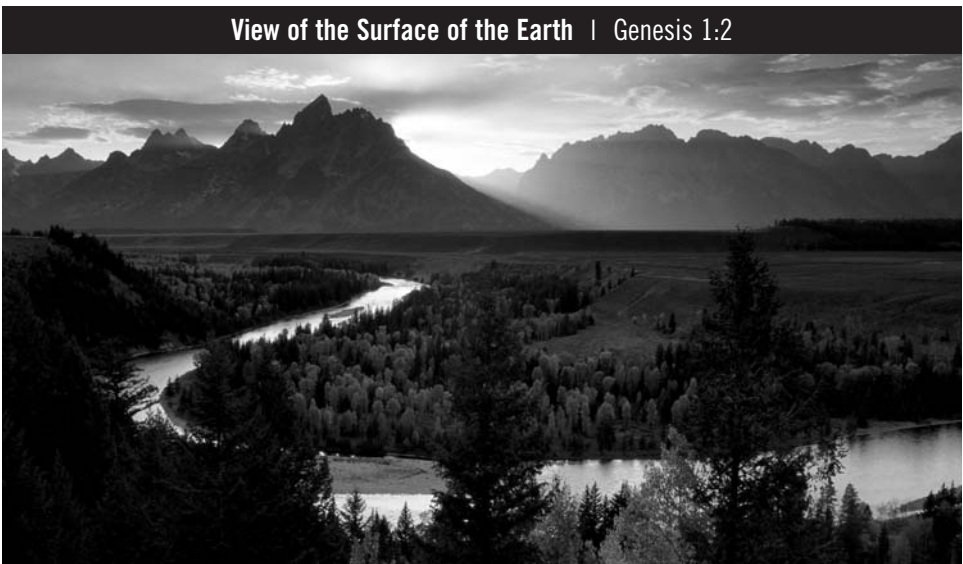
As mentioned above, the first step in the scientific method is to establish the frame of reference. Now let's apply this principle to interpreting Genesis 1.

Verse 1 gives readers a panorama of the universe as a whole. It represents God’s perspective on the entire cosmos.



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Genesis 1:2 then zooms readers in for the close-up. The author shifts the focus from the creation of the entire universe to God’s creative acts on the surface of the Earth as He prepares the planet for human life.



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This crucial shift sets the frame of reference for the rest of the chapter. In other words, Moses describes the rest of God’s creation miracles as they would have looked to an observer standing on the surface of the Earth as opposed to giving us a God’s-eye view of the planet. The importance of this principle will become apparent in future lessons.

SCIENCE CONNECTION

Genesis 1:1 and 1:2 both mention the Earth’s existence before Creation Day 1. Then, the six days of creation focus on God’s creative activity on the Earth.

Scientists tell us that the universe began approximately 13.73 billion years ago (give or take a hundred million) and the Earth solidified approximately 4.5662 billion years ago (give or take a hundred thousand).

Consider this: If Genesis 1:1 refers to the beginning of the universe and 1:2 refers to the condition of the early Earth, then it’s possible that ***almost 10 billion years pass between the first and second verses of Genesis!***

Now let’s examine Genesis 1:2 in detail.

1. What were the early conditions on our planet?

“The earth was _____ and _____.”



Hebrew Lesson: The Hebrew words translated “formless” (*tōhû*) and “void” (*bōhû*, NASB) can be confusing. In English, it sounds like Genesis 1:2 is telling us the Earth was a huge formless mass without any defined shape. But that’s not an accurate picture of what the author wants us to know. It would be more correct to say the phrase “formless and void” describes the earth as a “useless space,” a place of desolation, wasteness, and chaos. So while the primordial planet was fully formed, it was empty of life and unfit for life.

Many people have pointed out the intriguing similarity between the description of the early Earth in Genesis 1:2 with other ancient creation myths, which frequently describe the world as emerging out of a watery chaos. Unlike other myths, however, the biblical Creator does not emerge from the chaos. Rather, Israel's God even created the "chaos" itself! And as we will see in Lesson 4, God will progressively and purposefully transform that chaos into an ideal home for humanity.

2. The early Earth was shrouded in _____
and covered by _____.

3. The verses below also describe the conditions of the early Earth.
Do you notice any similarities between these passages and Genesis 1:2?

Job 38:4, 9

Psalm 104:5–6

Proverbs 8:27–29

4. According to Genesis 1:2, who was present on the Earth during this chaotic time?

Many Bible scholars note a close connection between Genesis 1:2 and Deuteronomy 32:9–11. This passage is from the "Song of Moses" as he describes the emerging nation of Israel during their sojourn in the wilderness. (Remember, Moses is also the traditional author of Genesis.) Genesis 1:2 and

Deuteronomy 32:9–11 share two intriguing parallels:

1. Deuteronomy 32:10 uses the word “barren” (*tōhû*) to describe the desolate land that the Israelites wandered through. Genesis 1:2 uses the same word (translated as “formless”) to describe early Earth.
2. The English word translated “hovers” (or “brooding”) in Deuteronomy 32:11 is the same Hebrew word used to describe the Spirit of God hovering over the water in Genesis 1:2. The image in Deuteronomy 32:11 is that God nurtured and protected the burgeoning nation of Israel just as a mother eagle broods over her young.



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5. How might the word picture presented in Deuteronomy 32:9–11 influence our understanding of what’s going on in Genesis 1:2?

Some people say that after the creation event, God set up the laws of nature and then stepped back to allow the universe to unfold on its own through natural processes, including evolution. But that’s not the picture the Bible presents. According to Genesis 1:2, God remains intimately involved with His creation as His Spirit resided on the surface of the Earth.



“Genesis 1:2 is an amazing Scripture. It presents a remarkably accurate description in terms of its scientific depiction of the early Earth. The planet was dark, covered with water and a hostile environment. The agreement between the creation account in Genesis and the natural history of the Earth is phenomenal to me.”

Fazale Rana, Ph.D. ■ Author, *Origins of Life*

In just a few moments, you'll watch part of a lecture by Dr. Fazale Rana in which he outlines the biblically described conditions on the early Earth and how they compare with the latest scientific findings. But it's worth taking a moment first to clarify the difference between accepting that the universe is ancient and embracing biological evolution. Believing the universe is billions of years old makes some Christians nervous because it seems like a concession to Darwinian evolution. But nothing could be further from the truth! 14 billion years is still too little time for random natural-process evolution to produce even the simplest life-form, much less the diverse history of life-forms that fill the fossil record. We still need the Creator to intervene and create the just-right life-forms at the just-right time.

In the video, Dr. Rana will compare the Reasons To Believe (RTB) testable creation model with the textbook evolutionary model. A quick summary of some key points may be helpful.

The Early Earth	
According to the Bible	According to Science
Covered with water	A waterworld
Shrouded in darkness	Dark on the surface due to an opaque atmosphere and interplanetary debris
A hostile environment	Extremely chaotic and “hellish”—due to major impact events
Presence of God “brooding” over Earth	Microscopic life appeared fully formed and performing chemically complex functions

Once again, science confirms what God said through the Bible thousands of years ago!

PLAY DVD LESSON 3: “THE MYSTERY OF LIFE’S ORIGIN”
(25 MINUTES)

FOR FURTHER STUDY

Many Christians struggle to embrace the findings of modern science. Can secular scientists be trusted? This concern stems from a widespread view that non-Christians cannot interpret the facts of nature correctly. After all, haven't their scientific perceptions been distorted by sin?

The key biblical basis for skepticism about secular science rests in a particular interpretation of Genesis 3:17–18. Some Christians assert that God's curse on the ground means creation became a broken and unreliable revelation of God, spoiled by humanity's sin. However, several Scripture references that describe the post-Fall creation draw this idea into question:

- Creation reveals the power of God: Job 36:30, 36:32, 37:3, 37:11–13; Romans 1:20.
- Creation is a testimony of God's love: Psalms 33:5–6, 136:1–9; Acts 14:17.
- Creation clearly reveals certain characteristics of God: Psalms 19:1–6, 68:32–35, 96:3–6; Romans 1:18–25.
- God compares His covenant faithfulness to creation: Psalm 89:35–37; Jeremiah 33:20–21, 33:25–26.

Based on these passages, a fuller understanding of God's words in Genesis 3 begins to emerge. Whatever the curse on the ground means, it cannot indicate that creation became so spoiled that it no longer proclaims the glory of God. Moreover, nature continues to provide real knowledge about the existence and attributes of God to the unbeliever. According to Romans 1:18–20, non-Christians can study the record of nature and come to certain conclusions about the identity and character of the Creator. So the message of the cosmos must be clear enough for nonbelievers to interpret it correctly.

Some Christians claim, based on their interpretation of Genesis 3, that nonbelievers are incapable of accurately studying the natural world. Through Adam's sin, humanity was not only cursed, but the intellect also became hopelessly darkened. Yet, once again, scriptural support for this claim seems thin. Though the effects of Adam's sin resulted in spiritual death and potentially eternal separation from a holy God (apart from salvation in Christ), it doesn't follow that the Fall was intellectually debilitating to the point that scientific endeavors become impossible.

In fact, the Bible seems to assume that nonbelievers are able to study the physical realm with satisfactory accuracy.

At minimum, nonbelievers built civilizations, such as the cities of Cain, Nineveh, Sodom, Gomorrah, and Babylon. These feats suggest that they utilized basic principles of physics and engineering. In another instance, the pagan king of Tyre sent cedar logs, carpenters, and stonemasons to David to help build his palace (2 Sam. 5:11). Nonbelievers classified the trees correctly and employed basic engineering principles.

Everyday experience buttresses this understanding. The very process of scientific discovery depends on objective knowledge based on universally applicable principles. For example, ancient Greek mathematician Eratosthenes calculated the circumference and diameter of the Earth by studying the angle of the Sun in different cities. Today, students all over the world duplicate his experiment. Another ancient Greek scholar, Euclid, wrote the textbook *Elements*, which presents the basics of geometry. Ancient Hindus implemented the number “0” in the number system, an integral part of mathematics. Chemists from all religious perspectives use the periodic table of the elements successfully to duplicate reactions that produce everything from simple compounds to complex polymers. And, secular scientists discovered DNA.

In sum, biblical examples, as well as common experience, indicate that in the natural order of things, nonbelievers experience the world in the same way Christians do. They are also more than capable of making unique and reliable discoveries about the natural world apart from any knowledge of the Bible.

The limitation for nonbelievers is not that they can't do good science. It's that they have the same problem as everyone else—they are sinners in need of salvation (see Romans 1:21–23). Nothing in Scripture would lead us to believe that astronomers can't properly understand that stars exist. Or that they can't correctly categorize stars by type and discover how they form, or understand their various burning cycles, or their purpose in the natural world. Nontheist scientists often detect the design in the universe. The only question for them is whether the design is *real or apparent*? At that point, if they don't give glory to God, then they “resist the truth in unrighteousness.” Only by the work of the Holy Spirit can *anyone* respond appropriately to truth—whether that truth is found in nature or in Scripture.

Should Christians trust *all* of the findings of secular science? Obviously not.

We need to look carefully to see if the research and the conclusions drawn from it are valid. Then, if it has been responsibly confirmed, we should gratefully embrace it as another piece of the puzzle that reveals more of God's good creation. Likewise, Scripture warns against accepting everything we hear. We need to put the interpretations of both theologians and scientists to the test to see if they're accurate (Matt. 7:15–20, 22–23; 1 Thess. 5:21; 1 John 4:1).

REFLECTION

Take a few moments to reflect about the importance of God's miraculous creation of the first life. How does knowing that the life has been intentionally created by God give your life meaning and purpose?