

Parashat Bereisheet 5778

Creation & Evolution in Jewish Thought

Can one believe in both? How do you reconcile the Creation story with science?

Source: <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/creationism-evolution-in-jewish-thought/>

The scientific theory of evolution seems to contradict the biblical account of Creation. While the Bible claims that God created the world in six days, culminating with the creation of humanity, the theory of evolution asserts that humanity evolved over billions of years. How do Jews approach this contradiction? Like any seeming contradiction between science and Jewish tradition, there are several options.

Is It a Contradiction?

Some Jews, including many of the ultra-Orthodox, reject evolutionary theory. They see the Bible as embodying eternal truths. Thus, some of the ultra-Orthodox are unwilling to reinterpret it in order to reconcile it with a scientific theory that, in their view, may be disproved in another hundred years. Some even go so far as to ban Jewish books on evolution.

For example, in 2005, a few prominent ultra-Orthodox rabbis banned Natan Slifkin's books on science and the Torah, which seem to support evolutionary theory (Slifkin himself is also Orthodox). Those who ban Slifkin's books see his arguments as challenging Jewish religious authority and undermining Jewish faith.

Other Jews reject the biblical account of creation because it contradicts evolutionary theory. They see the Bible as an ancient human document that cannot provide a helpful description of the world's beginnings for a person living in the twentieth century. They look to modern science to explain the origin of the world and reject religious explanations.

For example, Steven Pinker, a prominent evolutionary psychologist and Jewish atheist, rejects religious explanations of the origins of the world. He argues that the theory of natural selection best explains the origins of complex life, and no God could possibly have created a world that has so many faults in its design.

Variety of Approaches, Even Among the Orthodox

Many Jews, however, reject the either/or approach and strive to integrate the biblical account with the findings of modern science. Some Orthodox Jewish scientists read evolutionary theory into the Bible, arguing that the Bible and modern scientific theory describe the same process using different language. Most famously, Gerald Schroeder, an Israeli physicist, uses Einstein's theory of relativity to explain how God's six 24-hour days of creation are equivalent to fifteen billion years of scientific evolution.

Other Jewish thinkers, such as Mordecai Kaplan and Yeshayahu Leibowitz, reconcile the biblical account of creation with evolutionary theory by rejecting literal understandings of the Bible in favor of metaphorical or allegorical readings. They argue that the Bible is not meant to provide an accurate scientific description of the origins of the world. Rather, it is a spiritual account of why the world came into being and what our role is in it. These thinkers follow a long tradition of Jewish commentators who view the Bible non-literally, from rabbis of the Talmudic era to Maimonides.

Some kabbalists embrace aspects of evolutionary theory as a corroboration of Kabbalistic understandings of the origins of the world and its development. Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, the first Ashkenazic Chief Rabbi of

Israel, saw evolutionary theory as support for the Kabbalistic ideas of the unity of life and the progressive unfolding of natural history.

A New Layout of the Universe

Recent scientific developments have provided new opportunities for reconciling the biblical account of creation with scientific cosmogony. Most notably, the Big Bang theory, which has gained widespread acceptance in the scientific community today, asserts that the universe began at a particular point in time. This theory can support the biblical account of intentional creation at a particular time by God.

The hotly contested debate regarding teaching evolution vs. intelligent design in American schools has increased discussion of evolution within the American Jewish community. Some American Jews reject the term “intelligent design,” seeing it as part of an attempt to bring Christianity into the public schools. Yet many Jews, even those who argue against the proponents of intelligent design, still strive to see the hand of God in the origins of the world. In the wake of these debates, Jews today continue to struggle to reconcile the traditional Jewish belief in creation with the scientific theory of evolution.

Comparing origin stories: Genesis 1 & 2 vs. the theory of Evolution

How Christians and Jews view the creation story of Genesis 1.1 to 2.3: (source: [Religious Tolerance.org](http://ReligiousTolerance.org))

Religious conservatives -- both Jewish and Christian -- generally believe that the Bible is inerrant and that God directly inspired its authors. Thus, they believe that the creation story in Genesis must have been absolutely true, in its original or autograph copies: God formed the world, its life forms, and the rest of the universe in one continual act of creation. Conservatives have developed conflicting theories concerning the number of years in the past that creation happened; they range from 3615 BCE to the interval measured by scientists: 4.5 billion years. They also differ in their estimate of the time interval taken for the creation sequence to be finished; these range from six 24-hour days to billions of years. In those verses where Genesis conflicts with the theory of evolution, religious conservatives assume that the scientists must be wrong. Given sufficient time, they expect the scientists to see the light and discover the truth.

Religious liberals, Agnostics, Atheists, Humanists, secularists, etc. generally reject the inerrancy and inspiration of the Bible. Most believe that the first creation story in Genesis is actually a re-written version of a Babylonian creation myth, which was composed many centuries before Genesis was first written down. They believe that the Theory of Evolution gives an accurate overall description of the development of species of life on Earth. Most also believe that the universe is on the order of 13 billion years of age, and that the earth coalesced about 4.5 billion years ago.

Sources of information:

Religious conservatives generally believe that the five books from Genesis to Deuteronomy -- the Pentateuch -- were written by Moses and that he was inspired by God to write the books without error. The first two chapters in Genesis, in their original or autograph version, thus provide a precise step-by-step account of God's creation process.

Religious liberals generally reject the belief that the Bible is inerrant and that its authors were directly inspired by God. Most liberal sources accept the [Documentary Hypothesis](#): that the Pentateuch was written by a number of authors from four different traditions, who imported some material from Pagan sources in nearby cultures. They typically believe that there were three authors involved:

- **Genesis 1:1 to 2:3:** This was written by an anonymous writer or group of writers from the 6th Century [BCE](#), generally referred to as "P." He/they were of the priestly tradition. Most religious liberals believe that the first creation story in Genesis was based upon [earlier Babylonian Pagan myths of origins](#).
 - **Genesis 2:4a:** This was written by an anonymous writer, called "R," a redactor who joined the writings of "P," "J" and two other writers or groups of writers into the present Pentateuch.
 - **Genesis 2:4b to 2:15:** This was written by "J," an anonymous writer or group of writers who lived in the southern kingdom of Judah, and wrote parts of the Pentateuch between 848 [BCE](#) (when King Jehoram gained power in Judah) and 722 BCE when the Assyrians destroyed the northern kingdom of Israel, taking its people into exile. Some scholars date J to the 10th century BCE.
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About the origins story in Genesis:

Genesis 1:1 to 2:3 describes the creation of the earth, its life forms, and the rest of the universe. It happened in six intervals of time, each defined by the Hebrew word "Yom." Conservative Christians differ on the precise meaning of "Yom," which is generally translated as "day." Various groups define "day" as representing:

- A standard 24 hour day.
 - Indefinitely long intervals, perhaps hundreds of millions of years duration. All intervals are not necessarily of the same length.
 - A 24 hour day, but with the first and second day separated by a very long time interval.
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About origins from the Theory of Evolution:

The *Theory of Evolution* normally describes the gradual change in species of plants and animals, starting with a very primitive single-celled life form, and ending -- at least currently -- with human beings. Humans and higher apes are believed to have had a common ancestor. For over a century, many supporters of creation science have often stated that promoters of Evolution believe that humans are descended from apes; however this is not true. Radiometric measurements on rocks indicate that the Earth coalesced about 4.6 billion years ago. Fossil records of primitive life date back to about 3.5 billion years ago.

The sequence of creation in Genesis does contain some incompatibilities with the theory of evolution.

- Light was listed as being created on day 1, but its primary source (the sun, planets, and stars) did not appear until day 4. Most creation scientists, who generally support the literal interpretation of this creation story, have a solution to this puzzle. Many say that light initially came from God, before he created the sun and stars.
- The Genesis account states that birds were said to be created before other land animals. Paleontologists, who almost universally support the theory of evolution, point out that the fossil record shows the

opposite order. Creation scientists discount this belief. Most regard the rock layers containing the fossil record as having been laid down during the flood of Noah; thus, the fossils do not represent the evolution of the species of animals and birds. They were laid down during a single year and include all of the species that existed at the time of the flood.

- The most controversial debate over this creation story relates to its time span. Genesis 1 and 2 explain how Creation of Earth's life forms, the Earth itself, and the rest of the universe took six "days." Supporters of the theory of evolution find evidence for a universe that has been evolving for about 14 billion years.

Comparison of 1st creation story with the theory of evolution:

There are many discrepancies between the first creation story (derived from the Bible) and evolutionary theory (derived from astronomical observations, the fossil records, radiometric dating of rocks, etc.)

Item	According to Genesis	According to Evolution Theory
Source	Genesis 1:1 to 2:3	Paleontologists, Biologists, Astronomers, Geologists, etc.
Sun	Created after the world	Present before world coalesces
Grass, land plants, trees	Created before the sun	Evolved after the sun
First forms of life	Land plants	Marine organisms
Birds	Created before land animals	Evolved from land animals
Fruit Trees	Created before fish	Evolved after fish
Initial diet of animals	Restricted to plants	Animals evolved as meat, plant eaters, and omnivores.
Age of the universe	Less than 10,000 years	About 14 billion years
Age of the Earth	Less than 10,000 years	About 4.5 billion years
Age of earliest life forms	Less than 10,000 years	About 3.5 billion years
Where humans came from	From Adam who was created by God(s). Genesis 1:27 does not explain the method. Genesis 2:7 explains that Adam was made from dust, the ground, or soil (translations differ).	Evolved; higher apes and Homo Sapiens share a common ancestor. Actually, any two species of life have a common ancestor, even humans and cabbages, or dogs and sharks.

The theory of evolution concludes that all life forms can be traced back to a primitive one-cell animal. Exactly how that simple animal developed out of non-living matter is beyond the scope of the theory evolution. The origins of life are the subject of a separate field of science, called: abiogenesis.

Conservative Jewish Approaches: (source: <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/judaism-and-evolution>)

Conservative Judaism embraces science as a way to learn about God's creation, and like Orthodox and Reform Judaism, has found the theory of evolution a challenge to traditional Jewish theology. The Conservative Jewish movement has not yet developed one official response to the subject, but a broad array of views has converged. Conservative Jews teach that God created the universe and is responsible for the creation of life within it, but proclaims no mandatory teachings about how this occurs at any level.

Many Conservative rabbis embrace the term theistic evolution, and most reject the term intelligent design. Conservative rabbis who use the term *intelligent design* in their sermons often distinguish their views from the Christian fundamentalist use of this term. Like most in the scientific community, they understand "intelligent design" to be a technique by fundamentalist Christians to insert religion into public schools and to attack science, as admitted in the Intelligent Design movement's wedge strategy position papers.

In contrast to fundamentalist views, Conservative Judaism strongly supports the use of science as the proper way to learn about the physical world in which we live, and thus encourages its adherents to find a way to understand evolution in a way that does not contradict the findings of peer-reviewed scientific research. The tension between accepting God's role in the world and the findings of science, however, is not resolved, and a wide array of views exists. Some mainstream examples of Conservative Jewish thought are as follows:

Professor [Ismar Schorsch](#), chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, writes that:

The Torah's story of creation is not intended as a scientific treatise, worthy of equal time with Darwin's theory of evolution in the curriculum of our public schools. The notes it strikes in its sparse and majestic narrative offer us an orientation to the Torah's entire religious worldview and value system. Creation is taken up first not because the subject has chronological priority but rather to ground basic religious beliefs in the very nature of things. And I would argue that their power is quite independent of the scientific context in which they were first enunciated.

Rabbi David J. Fine, who has authorized official responsa for the Conservative Movement's Committee on Jewish Law and Standards, expresses a common Conservative Jewish view on the subject:

Conservative Judaism has always been premised on the total embrace of critical inquiry and science. More than being compatible with Conservative Judaism, I would say that it is a mitzvah to learn about the world and the way it works to the best of our abilities, since that is to marvel with awe at God's handiwork. To not do so is sinful.

But here's where the real question lies. Did God create the world, or not? Is it God's handiwork? Many of the people who accept evolution, even many scientists, believe in what is called "theistic evolution," that is, that behind the billions of years of cosmic and biological evolution, there is room for belief in a creator, God, who set everything into motion, and who stands outside the universe as the cause and reason for life. The difference between that and "intelligent design" is subtle yet significant. Believing scientists claim that belief in God is not incompatible with studying evolution since science looks only for the natural explanations for phenomena. The proponents of intelligent design, on the other hand, deny the ability to explain life on earth through solely natural explanations. That difference, while subtle, is determinative.

“It is said that science demystifies nature, but scientists on the frontier are awed by the elegance and harmony of nature.... What science shows us about the evolution of our universe and ourselves is as awe-inspiring as the accounts in Genesis or the Kabbalah.”

Daniel Matt, author of “God and the Big Bang”

“In Judaism, there's no concept of “God says it, I believe it, that settles it.” Instead, Judaism pushes us to embrace the text for what it was back then, and to create new ways of reading the text for what it can be now.”

Rabbi Geoffrey Mittelman, “[Why Judaism Embraces Science](#)”