

Biblical vs. Pagan Creation

Ancient and Modern Views on the Origin of the Universe

I. Introduction

How did the universe come into being? This question has been asked by thinking people of every culture throughout history. The answer reveals much of what each belief system thinks not only of God or the gods, but also of the value of human life itself.

The question of origins has often been called *cosmogony* from the Greek *cosmos* (“universe”) and *genia* (“birth”). Thus, it refers to “an account, usually in the form of a mythological tale, about the genesis or birth of a structured universe.”¹ In contrast, a *cosmology* is more scientific in that it is “a blueprint or map of the universe as a comprehensible and meaningful place.”²

II. Common Elements of Biblical and Pagan Creation Accounts

A. Content

1. All ancient pagan stories of man’s origins agree with the Bible that the universe was created rather than the product of chance. In this sense, the peoples of the Ancient Near East could see what often escapes many modern pagans—that an orderly universe came into being by a creative intelligence. (Actually, an indigenous atheistic society has never been discovered by anthropologists.)
2. Both the biblical and pagan perspectives on origins attributed the actions of God/gods to the causes of man’s experiences in life.
3. Certain themes are common to biblical and pagan stories: preexisting watery chaos (all pagan accounts), creation by the spoken word (Egyptian), and man being made from clay (Sumerian).

B. Style

1. Both biblical and pagan origins were related through stories. None of them exists as a systematized theology or scientific explanation attempted today. “As science answers such questions for moderns, so cosmological narratives answered them for traditional societies.”³
2. As noted above, another common stylistic feature is how each story begins with the pre-existing chaotic state of the earth (cf. Gen. 1:2). All creation stories acknowledge this chaos, though they differ in how it came into existence.

¹ Robert A. Oden, Jr., “Cosmogony & Cosmology,” *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 1:1164.

² Oden, “Cosmogony & Cosmology,” 1:1164.

³ Oden, “Cosmogony & Cosmology,” 1:1169.

III. Contrasts Between Various Creation Views

	<i>How Did the Universe Get Here?</i>	<i>How Were Humans Created?</i>
Sumerian	Enlil ordered the primeval dark chaos of sea (Nammu) and then separated the sky (Anu) and the earth (Ki). Enlil then raped the air goddess Ninlil to give birth to Nanna (Sin), the moon god. Nanna then gave birth to the sun god.	According to two Sumerian myths, the lesser gods had to farm for their food. They also hated cleaning rivers and canals so Enki, god of water and wisdom, mixed water with clay to form humans to look like the gods and lessen their work (cf. Gen. 2:7). ⁴
Babylonian	The original world was a chaos of water with three gods: Apsu, Tiamat and Mummu. Sex between the male Apsu and female Tiamat created the other gods, who fought against them. Marduk (king of the created gods) slew Tiamat and cut her into two halves that became the land and sea (cf. Gen. 1:6-8). Thus the world started from a young upstart who murdered an older woman! ⁵	Humans were made from the blood of Tatum's co-conspirator Kingu to do the work of the lazy gods. ⁶
Egyptian	Various creation stories each highlight a different creator in their city. For Memphis, "All the divine order really came into being through what the heart thought and the tongue commanded" from "the gods who came into being as Ptah" (cf. Gen. 1:3, etc.) ⁷ The city of On (Heliopolis) said Atum created himself and then brought the other gods into being above the waters of chaos. He then brought order and gave the deities Osiris, Seth, and to others their respective functions. Other creators were Thoth (Hermopolis), Amon (Thebes in Upper Egypt), and the ram-headed Khnum (Elephantine and Philae islands).	The gods are represented as "he" in which "he gave the breath for their noses to live" (cf. Gen. 2:7) so that "they are his images, who came from his body" (cf. Gen. 1:26). ⁸ Man was created to serve the gods. In the account of Atum, the Creator, the sun god Re (=Ra or Atum-Ra or Amun-Ra) made man from his tears and created them all equal.

⁴ "Enki, Ninmakh, and the Creation of Humankind" and "The Epic of Atra-khasis," in Arnold/Beyer, 20-24.

⁵ The Akkadian story "Enuma Elish" taught this around 1000 BC (in Bill T. Arnold and Bryan E. Beyer, *Readings from the Ancient Near East* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002], 31-32).

⁶ Arnold/Beyer, 43.

⁷ The *Memphite Creation Story (Memphite Theology)* represented above is but one of many Egyptian views of creation (Arnold/Beyer, 63-64). Another says that life originated from the primordial waters (Nun) when Re (sun god) created himself. He brought order from the chaos by taking control from eight pre-existing gods and created other gods whom like him personified a different element of nature (John D. Currid, *Ancient Egypt and the Old Testament* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997], 40-42).

⁸ *Instruction of Merikare* translated by Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, 1.106 in Arnold/Beyer, 65.

Canaanite

Baal (god of rain, vegetation, and fertility) defeated the forces of chaos. However, each summer Mot (god of death and summer drought) again rules until he is slain by Anath (goddess of love, fertility, and war), which brings spring rains again. Canaanite rituals tried to entice sex between Baal and Anath to repeat the agricultural cycle.⁹

No mention is made of how humans came into existence.¹⁰ Humans are merely initiators who motivate the gods to maintain the seasonal cycles. The assumption is that these gods would otherwise care less.

Greek

Greek deities were created to replace beings existing before them. From the high god Chaos appeared the full-breasted Earth (Gaea) and the attracting force Eros that became mother of all things. Gaea created the high mountains and the sea while Chaos birthed the powers of darkness and light.

The Greek concept of man's creation is part of the whole story, but only the heroes are depicted as at the left.

Orphic myth had Phanes emerge from an egg to create the universe and the ancient heroes of the Golden Age—and then retire. Zeus then swallowed him and his creation, and then recreated the present world order.¹¹

IV. Applications Today

- A. Pagan stories of man's origin should share some common ground with the biblical account. This is because even unregenerate man is made in God's image and elements of the true narrative were passed down in pagan societies through oral tradition. In like manner, similarities exist today between Christian and non-Christian explanations of origins—except that nearly all ancients believed in creation, not evolution. Paul used this common ground to his advantage in his speech on Mars Hill (Acts 17). We also should show respect for people with differing views of creation.
- B. Genesis 1 was a polemic against the pagan views of the origin of the universe.¹²
1. It does not mention a single pagan deity, except indirectly: “On the first day the gods of light and darkness are dismissed. On the second day, the gods of the sky and sea. On the third day, earth gods and gods of vegetation. On the fourth day, sun, moon, and stars. The fifth and sixth days take away any associations with divinity from the animal kingdom. And finally human existence, too, is emptied of any intrinsic divinity—while at the same time all human beings, from greatest to the least, and not just pharaohs, kings and heroes are granted a divine likeness and mediation.”¹³

⁹ Ugaritic myths detail these horrific stories in the “Baal Cycle,” in Arnold/Beyer, 50-62.

¹⁰ Gerald A. Larue, *Ancient Myth and Modern Man* (Prentice-Hall, 1975), 44; cited by Raymond Kwan, “Creation,” unpublished research paper for the course OT Backgrounds, SBC, 2004, p. 3.

¹¹ The Theogony of Hesiod (8th cent. BC); R. K. Harrison, “Creation,” in *The Zondervan Pictorial Bible Encyclopedia*, ed. Merrill C. Tenney (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975, 1976), 1:1020.

¹² Thomas Brisco, “The Creation Narratives: A View from the Tell,” *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 40 (1998): 58; cited by Razovelhu Vasa, “Creation,” unpublished research paper for the course OT Backgrounds, SBC, 2004, p. 2.

¹³ Chia Choon Yee, “Creation,” unpublished research paper for the course OT Backgrounds, SBC, 2004, p. 2.

2. Notice the preceding contrasts in several ways:

<i>Pagan</i>	<i>Biblical (Genesis)</i>
Polytheistic	Monotheistic (1:1)
Myth	History
Written to satisfy man's curiosity on origins	Written to glorify God & extend his rule
The gods created themselves and other gods	Jesus existed before creation (John 1:1-3)
The gods struggled for sovereignty	Yahweh sovereign by nature (1:3)
Man mostly not in divine image (low status)	Man created in God's image (high status)
People made to be slaves of the gods	Man rules over creation (1:26-27)
The most powerful god used magic to create	Yahweh did not need to use magic
Male and female gods had sexual activity	Yahweh had no female consort
Creation resulted from conflict between gods	Creation by orderly means
Creative activity not separated into days	Six days of creation model the work week
These are gods in and of themselves	Creation of light, sun, sky, moon, etc.
No corresponding rest day is taught	A Sabbath rest completes creation
Material assumed to be eternal in the past	No pre-existent material (Heb. 11:3)

- C. As believers today, we have a responsibility to share the truth in the right column above rather than assume that unbelievers share our worldview.
1. Since the doctrine of creation is foundational to everything we believe, we must not compromise with evolution or other theories that demean man's high status!
 2. The irony is that evolution exalts man by claiming that the origin of the universe came without God, but then the theory puts man on a far lower level than Scripture as an "exalted animal," basically no different than the animals.
 3. However, Genesis 1 does not explain creation by directly attacking alternative theories. Instead, it presents the truth positively, with pagan views only implied. In like manner, believers generally need not attack godless views of origins directly but only need to speak the truth in love (Eph. 4:15; cf. 1 Pet. 3:15).
- D. Biblical creation provides the foundation for ethical living in the Ten Commandments.¹⁴
1. Why have no other gods (Exod. 20:3)? This is because the LORD alone made heaven and earth (Gen. 1:1).
 2. Why not murder (Exod. 20:13)? This is because humans alone are created in God's image (Gen. 1:26-28).
 3. Why have a day of rest (Exod. 20:8-11)? This is because God set it apart from other days as a holy day (Gen. 2:2-3).

V. Conclusion

Both similarities and differences exist between the accounts of origins in Israel and the other nations. Similarities exist as pagans had an oral tradition stemming from Noah's sons, distorted as it was. However, the Genesis account is unique in its high view of both God and man, bringing the true creation story to Israel and ultimately to us as well.

¹⁴ Adapted from Chia Choon Yee, 2.

Creation vs. Evolution

	Creation	Evolution
<i>Source for belief</i>	God's Word	Man's speculations
<i>Basis for belief</i>	Reasonable faith (no eyewitnesses or repeatable events, but order stemming from order)	Leap of faith (no eyewitnesses or repeatable events, but order stemming from disorder)
<i>Assumption about God</i>	God exists	God does not exist
<i>Cause for ordered universe</i>	Primary (intelligent) causes	Secondary (natural) causes
<i>Foundation of the cause</i>	Design	Chance (accidents)
<i>Origin of matter</i>	God's spoken word	No explanation
<i>Origin of universe</i>	God's spoken word made the right balance of air molecules, enough water (found only on earth), the right distance from the sun, a protective ozone layer to allow visible light to pass through but keeps out harmful ultraviolet light, a perfect 23.5 degree tilt to produce seasons, the correct orbits for the planets, etc.	Big Bang: all the energy and matter exploded, creating hydrogen gas molecules that collected themselves into stars (but this contradicts scientific fact that gas pressure pushing out is 100 times stronger than gravity pulling in—also, no one has ever seen an explosion create order!)
<i>Age of universe</i>	6,000-10,000 years	5 billion years
<i>Use of term "prehistoric"</i>	Inappropriate	Appropriate
<i>Origin of intelligence</i>	Outside intelligent source (God)	Evolved from non-intelligent matter
<i>Origin of the first life forms</i>	God's spoken word (Gen. 1:1)	A simple life form—life created itself. (Actually, there exists no such thing as the least complicated single cell—the bacterium is vastly complex.)
<i>Origin of man</i>	God's spoken word (Gen. 1:26-27)	Descended from bacteria, onions, cockroaches, snakes, and apes as a result of millions of DNA accidents

	Creation	Evolution
<i>Origin of man's soul</i>	Given by God (Gen. 2:7)	Does not exist or was added later
<i>Origin of human ethnic groups</i>	Intermarriage within the same language groups produced concentrations of genes (Gen. 11)	No explanation has been offered
<i>Origin of species</i>	Life always gives rise to life (the first immutable law of biology)	Life arose from dead, inorganic matter
<i>Propagation of species based on...</i>	Science (observed facts: all species reproduce after their own kinds; cf. Gen. 1:21, 24-25). In other words, like always gives rise to like (the second immutable law of biology).	Theory (unproved, unobserved ideas: e.g., while beings change or mutate to <i>higher</i> forms only once in 10,000 times, this miracle occurred millions of times to produce humans)
<i>Transitional life forms</i>	None required, none ever discovered	Millions required, none ever discovered
<i>View of historical events</i>	Catastrophism: the world has changed weather (climate), topography, etc. due to a worldwide Flood (and possibly an Ice Age)	Uniformitarianism: the world has continued with the same weather, erosion, etc. since time began (except an Ice Age?) as scoffers predict in 2 Pet. 3:4-5
<i>Relationship to 2nd law of thermodynamics ("all things move from order to disorder")</i>	Consistent with this law	Contradicts this law
<i>Man and dinosaurs</i>	Coexisted	Dinosaurs predated man by millions of years
<i>Depends on creativity from...</i>	the Creator	the created (man)
<i>Popularity among laymen</i>	Majority view	Rare
<i>Popularity among scientists</i>	Rare	Majority view
<i>Accountability to a Creator</i>	Great (man will be judged)	None (no judgment will occur)

Theistic Evolution

Despite the significant differences between creation and evolution (see the previous chart), some believe in *both*. These *theistic evolutionists* (from Greek *theos* for “God”) teach that God created the world by an evolutionary process.¹⁵ What can be said about theistic evolution claims?

1. **Inefficient:** “Evolution is the most wasteful, inefficient, cruel method that could be devised to create living things. Even evolutionists admit that almost all mutations are bad, causing cripples, sickness, disfigurements, and deaths.... God is all-powerful and wise. Why would He use such a wasteful, inefficient, cruel method to create man, taking three billion years to do it, when He is able to create instantaneously?”¹⁶
2. **Unscientific:** “There is not one fact of science which proves that God used evolution to create anything.”¹⁷ If God guided evolution, He has not allowed a single intermediate form of life to survive as evidence. Surely He would not allow all scientific facts to counter His creative process. All fossils represent fully formed creatures, just as one would expect from the Genesis account. But what of all the ape-like creatures that have been portrayed as transitional links between apes and man? “When all of the evidence is carefully and thoroughly studied by the best scientific methods, however, it turns out that these fossils were either from monkeys, apes, or people, and not from something that was part ape and part human.”¹⁸
 - a. *Pitldown Man*, found in Pitldown, England (1912), came from jaw and skull fragments. About 500 books and pamphlets were written about him until 1950, when someone discovered that it was actually the chemically treated skull of a modern human, made to *look* old, with ape teeth *filed down* to look human! This fraud fooled the world’s “experts” for almost 40 years.
 - b. *Nebraska Man* (1922) was based solely on a single tooth found in Nebraska. Additional bones of the creature later revealed it to be a pig!
 - c. *Neanderthal Man* (1860), found in the Neanderthal Valley in Germany, later had more fossils, such as a hunched-over full skeleton in France (1908). They used tools and had brain sizes similar to those of modern humans, but their skulls were flatter than ours and appeared primitive in some respects. However, Dr. Rudolph Virchow later identified the hunched-over skeleton as that of a Frenchman with arthritis. Other skeletons found are fully erect, and X-rays of the fossil bones and teeth now confirm that all Neanderthals were actually humans with rickets (caused by a lack of vitamin D).
 - d. Other “ape-men” are also discredited. *Ramapithecus* was an orangutan, and *Orce Man* was actually a six-month-old donkey. *Australopithecus* (1924) was believed by many evolutionists to be an ape and included a female form, *Australopithecus afarensis* (1973, nicknamed “Lucy”). However, when a knee joint was needed to prove that Lucy walked upright, they used one found more than 60 meters lower in the strata and more than three kilometers away.¹⁹ Also, Java Man’s discoverer (Dr. Eugene Dubois) later identified him as a giant gibbon, Peking Man as an ape, and Cro-Magnon Man as a modern European. Now, some evolutionists say that apes evolved from man!

¹⁵Modern theistic evolutionists include Francis S. Collins, *The Language of God: A Scientist Presents Evidence for Belief* (Free Press: 2006); Vernon Blackmore and Andrew Page, *Evolution: The Great Debate* (Oxford: Lion, 1989); R. J. Berry, *God and Evolution: Creation, Evolution and the Bible* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1988; idem, *Adam and the Ape: A Christian Approach to the Theory of Evolution* (London: Falcon, 1975). John Morton, *Redeeming Creation* (Auckland: Zealandia, 1984), 11 even calls evolution the Christian’s “cornerstone”!

¹⁶Duane T. Gish, *The Amazing Story of Creation* (El Cajon, CA: Institute for Creation Research, 1990), 44. This excellent, illustrated, 112 page full-colour book critiques evolution in simple language (SBC library # 213 GIS). See also his earlier books, *Dinosaurs: Those Terrible Lizards* and *Evolution: The Challenge of the Fossil Record*.

¹⁷Gish, 44.

¹⁸Gish, 78-79. The following examples are summarized from pages 78-83.

¹⁹Dr. Solly Zuckerman (head of the Department of Anatomy, Univ. of Birmingham, England) and Dr. Charles Oxnard (Prof. of Anatomy and Director of Graduate Studies at the Univ. of Southern California Medical School) both confirm that *Australopithecus* did *not* walk upright like humans and were not man’s ancestors. Zuckerman’s conclusions are published in his book, *Beyond the Ivory Tower* (1970). See Gish, 84.

3. Theological Problems: Theistic evolution is incompatible with scriptural theology in many ways:²⁰
- a. *The Creation Account*: The Bible gives no hint of evolution. The most natural reading of the Genesis account of creation is that God created in six literal days. The “day-age” theory, in which each “day” represents a long period of time (even millions of years), has attracted many advocates. However, Genesis 1 clearly says there was “evening and morning” each day. This excludes any evolutionary processes.
 - b. *The Fall and the Origin of Moral Evil*: Theistic evolutionists deny that Genesis 1–11 records real history, but call these chapters “great myths,” even denying that man ever fell into sin in the Garden.²¹ Yet the historicity of Adam is the basis upon which the NT compares Christ as the last Adam (Rom. 5:12-14; 1 Cor. 15:22, 45-49). Paul even linked the historicity of Adam to that of Christ’s resurrection (1 Cor. 15:12-23). The origin of evil cannot be attributed solely to “the heart of mankind,” since it originated with Satan, an external force (Gen. 3:1-5; Eph. 6:12).
 - c. *The Origin of Man*: Human life came when Adam was created from dust directly from God at a point in time (Gen. 2:7; cf. Matt. 19:4). Yet theistic evolutionists claim man received God’s image at an unknown point in time along the evolutionary chain; therefore, God’s image came after reproductive processes over millions of years of Adam and Eve’s “Neolithic progenitors.”²² Genesis 1:26-27 says that God created man in the image of *God*, not in the image of apes. Others also claim that the Bible is concerned only with man’s relationship with God, not ordinary human life.²³ Such a dichotomy contradicts Genesis, which deals with far more than spiritual life. Berry denies that Adam and Eve were ancestors to all mankind,²⁴ yet Eve is said to be “the mother of all the living” (Gen. 3:20; cf. Acts 17:26) and all mankind sinned through one man (Rom. 5:12). Theistic evolution downplays or denies the extent to which sin marred God’s image. This image became so perverted that God chose to destroy all humans except for one righteous man and his family (Gen. 6:5-7).²⁵
 - d. *Natural Selection, Death, and Suffering*: Theistic evolution makes God the author of suffering and death.²⁶ This gives atheists the opening to criticize Christians for believing in such a cruel God. Berry insists that death existed before Adam so that his sin in the Garden only brought spiritual, not physical death.²⁷ However, no sin or death existed before the Fall (Gen. 2:17; Rom. 5:12-15) so that all suffering resulted from man’s sin, not God’s (Gen. 3:15-19; Rom. 8:19-22). God made everything “very good.”
 - e. *Distinction Between Man and Animals*: Berry says man’s ability to obey is the only difference between man and animals.²⁸ But what about man’s ability to discern truth, communicate in speech, and his creative abilities? Theistic evolution is an error that vigorously opposes creation science and the Bible.

²⁰David H. Lane (a biologist in Wellington, New Zealand) has published a two-part series entitled “A Critique of Theistic Evolution.” Part one is “Special Creation or Evolution: No Middle Ground,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 150 (January-March 1994): 12-16. Part two is “Theological Problems with Theistic Evolution,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 150 (April-June 1994): 155-74, which forms the basis for the comments in points “b” to “e” in this section.

²¹Alan I. Richardson, *Preface to Bible Study*, rev. ed. (London: SCM, 1972), 75; cf. Blackmore and Page, 171; Martin Bott, “Down to Earth,” in *Real Science, Real Faith*, ed. R. J. Berry (Eastbourne: Monarch, 1991), 28-29.

²²Michael R. Johnson, *Genesis, Geology and Catastrophism: A Critique of Creationist Science and Biblical Literalism* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1988), 87; E. K. V. Pearce, *Who Was Adam?* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1969). Those who lived before Adam died not as a penalty for sin since they were “sinless” in that they had no fully evolved morality.

²³Douglas C. Spanner, *Biblical Creation and the Theology of Evolution* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1987), 57-59.

²⁴Berry, *God and Evolution*, 70.

²⁵Lane, “Theological Problems with Theistic Evolution,” 171.

²⁶Ibid, 90.

²⁷Ibid, 70; idem, *Adam and the Ape*, 51.

²⁸Berry, 159.