



Progressive Christianity Study Series

Study Number 001

“In the Beginning”



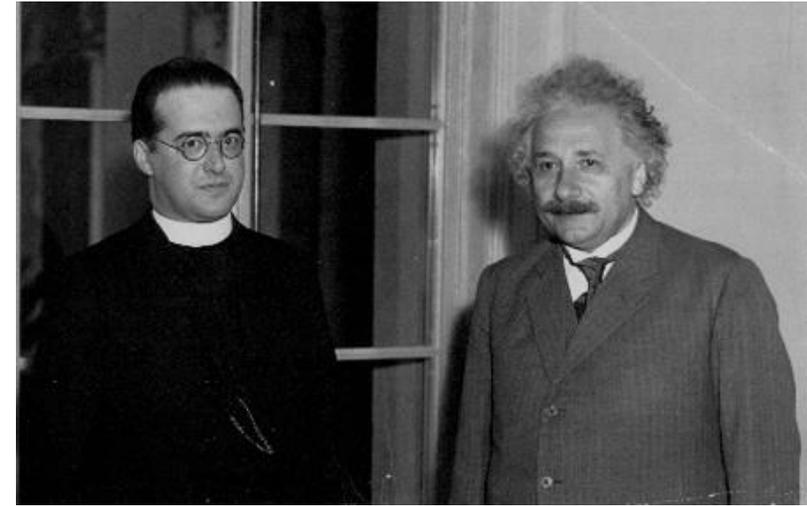
“In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth...”

“What sort of godless atheist came up with the idea of the Big Bang?!”



“Huh?!”

“A priest.”



In a scientific publication in 1927, Belgium priest and professor of astrophysics, Georges Lemaitre, proposed the cosmological theory now known as the Big Bang, whereby the universe had expanded over the course of billions of years from a “primeval atom.” Experimental evidence in support of this theory was provided in 1929 by Edwin Hubble. The term “Big Bang” was originally a disparaging term coined by physicist Fred Hoyle who preferred an eternal universe to one which had a definite beginning. The Big Bang, which posits the beginning of our expanding universe 13.7 billion years ago, now forms the centrepiece of standard cosmology.

What Genesis 1 and modern cosmology agree upon:

- The universe is not eternal, but had a definite beginning
- The universe we observe came about in stages, not all at once

Where Genesis 1 and modern cosmology differ:

- Genesis presents a mythological and theological account of “why” we are here; modern cosmology presents a scientific account of “how” we are here.

Biblical creation v modern cosmology: Unnecessary fisticuffs!

Some conservative Christians are put off by the Big Bang cosmology advanced by modern science. “But the bible says God created the universe in six days, not 13.7 billion years!” say some ‘young Earth’ creationists, who posit that the Earth is a mere 6000 years old (an age estimate made by archbishop James Usher, based on biblical chronologies), rather than the 4.5 billion years calculated by geoscientists. Other, ‘old Earth’ creationists might accept that the ‘six days’ of creation might not refer to six literal days, but rather six epochs of time. They would still insist, however, that in each of these six epochs God intervened to bring about a new stage of creation.

The creationist argument against modern cosmology is based on genre confusion. Creationists read Genesis 1 as though it was a scientific account of the origin of the universe when it is not. The bible, a compilation of 66 books by many authors, includes such genres as wisdom literature, law and morality codes, prophecy, history, legend, myth, poetry and gospel narrative. One particular genre that is entirely absent from the biblical corpus is that of scientific textbook. Genesis 1 is a mythopoetic origins story. If we read it instead as though it was a science text, it is little wonder that we draw ridiculous conclusions.



Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks:

“Science pulls things apart to see how they work; religion puts things together to see what they mean.”



God makes time for us, and makes us for time...

“How can the Big Bang be compatible with belief in a Creator God?! Are you saying that God started it with a Big Bang, and then sat back and waited to see what would happen by pure chance?!”

“Que?!”



“It depends on whether you see God as ‘waiting’ in time or ‘creating’ in eternity.”



Time and that which transcends time

There is a fascinating agreement between modern cosmology and the wisdom of an ancient Christian theologian.

A popular misconception of the Big Bang theory of cosmology imagines that 13.7 billion years ago an infinitesimally small point of matter exploded into what was previously empty space; this is incorrect. Rather, 13.7 billion years ago, space itself, and time, came into being as a unified fabric called spacetime. There was no “before” the Big Bang, because time itself came into being at the Big Bang.

Augustine of Hippo (354-430 CE):

“God created the world *and* time, not *in* time.”

If a creator God exists at all, then that God transcends time, existing outside of the spacetime universe we inhabit. Conceived in this way, it is imprecise to say that God *created* the universe 13.7 billion years ago. Rather, God, who exists outside of time, *is creating* the universe, in every temporal moment. Events which, from our human and temporal perspective, seem like chance events in the past or possible events in the future, exist to God as part of an eternal “now.” Creation may be God’s way of inviting everything and everyone to participate in the dynamic, moment-by-moment unfolding of what already exists eternally to God.

Invitation to reflection

1. Read chapter 1 of Genesis slowly and, as you do, reflect on the staggering age of the universe, and the various stages in its dynamic unfolding, including your birth and existence. What do you feel as you reflect on God's creative activities in the six "days" of creation?
2. In Genesis 1:31 we read, "God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good." When you look at the night sky, when you look around the Earth that is our home, do you, likewise, consider it all to be "very good"? If you are reluctant to call it all "very good," what reservations do you have about the "goodness" of the creation?
3. Are the "laws of nature" as presently understood by science compatible, in your view, with belief in a God who created everything, including, presumably, the laws of nature?
4. Think about your own understanding of the natural world and its origin. What questions arise for you? What sort of "why?" and "how?" and "when?" questions come to mind as you seek to reconcile what you observe and understand with your faith in a creator God?

