

Reasonable Inferences from Genesis 1

It Ain't Necessarily So

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There are some things in Scripture which are not only clear, but necessary. They are core to our understanding of who God is, who Christ is, and what causes our salvation. These are things like “God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen 1.1), or that salvation is “by grace through faith, not of works” (Eph 2.8-9). Even though someone may have a contrary opinion, it can be proven or disproven by the testimony of the Word of God – whether that is from direct testimony, or by reasonable inference from that testimony.

But there’s a qualifier, a limitation or restriction that keeps an interpretation from going so far beyond what is written, that a reasonable inference becomes *unreasonable*, a fantasy. Here’s the rule, from Milton S. Terry’s book on Hermeneutics: “The meaning of a passage is literal unless manifestly contradictory or absurd (general rule).” Of course, one man’s absurdity may be another man’s obvious truth. The word “absurd” can mean *ludicrous*, *laughable*. It can also mean *logically inconsistent*. The first is only a subjective reaction; we should avoid that. The second isn’t merely presumed to be true, but may be proven either logically, or by evidence.

In our course on Studying the Bible, we provide a simplified set of rules that are sufficient to cover most circumstances. And yet, even these simple rules needed to be explained using page after page of practical examples, to avoid misinterpreting the rules of interpretation.

TEN RULES

Rule 1. Scripture is the very word of God, and is inerrant in its original autographs.

Rule 2. Scripture is best interpreted by Scripture itself, and not by external events or writings.

Rule 3. The majority of passages on a specific topic will outweigh any exceptional passages on the same topic.

Rule 4. A specific passage outweighs a general passage *on the same topic*. Consequently, a specific passage would also outweigh a majority of passages that are only general in nature.

Rule 5. The *truth* of any given verse will be consistent with the whole truth of Scripture.

Rule 6. Therefore, the *context* of any given verse is also the whole of Scripture.

Rule 7. The *meaning* of any given verse is determined by its author, audience, circumstance, and intent (i.e., considering the purpose for writing it, and its historical setting).

Rule 8. The author, audience, circumstance, and intent, are determined in large part by the language used (vocabulary, grammar, etc.).

Rule 9. We rely on the original language, and not a translation of it, to determine the actual meaning of a Scriptural passage.

Rule 10. To understand the things of God, we depend on the illumination of the Holy Spirit, and not on our own knowledge, logic, or intellect alone; and certainly never on our feelings.

In our course, we give this caution before we present these rules, to distance ourselves from the “all means all” simplistic approach to interpretation:

The fundamentalist movement of the 1920s used rules that created confusion, even though they wanted to bring clarity. They taught that the Bible should be interpreted literally unless that produced absurdity. This is more than taking the “plain meaning” of a text. It’s letting the words control the meaning, instead of the larger context. Taking a literal meaning when it’s not appropriate, can create an inconsistency between passages.

There's that rule from Terry, that if an interpretation leads to an absurdity, or if it creates a contradiction, then it is suspect. And here we must not conflate "contradiction" with "mystery." There are some things in Scripture which only *seem to be* paradoxical or contradictory – but they're not. Specific and unambiguous testimonies, when put side by side, boggle the mind. The Trinity is one of those. How can Jesus be truly God, and yet as the Son of God, submit to the Father? How do we explain the combined divine and human natures in him, such that there can be no division or mixture between them? It challenges our understanding (Job 42.3). How do we properly worship a Triune God without confusing or disrespecting the individual Persons of the Godhead? This was the focus of hot debate at the council of Nicea in 325.

But we also provide a general over-arching principle:

The primary question is, **What was the author's intended meaning?** That meaning is not what the reader *thinks* was meant, but what the writer *actually* meant.

And the ten rules are a means by which we hope to determine the author's "intended meaning."

Before proceeding, there are other things that may create *unnecessary* conflict between clear testimonies of the Scripture. And there are some interpretations which, though inconsistent with one another, are not inconsistent with Scripture. It's not that they are matters of indifference; rather, they are matters about which sincere, sound believers may disagree. Such issues should be left open for discussion, unless it impacts the practice of the local church. Eschatology doesn't impact our practice; baptism does.

May we discuss and debate such things? Are they open to interpretation? Or must one of them be chosen and declared a *necessary* interpretation, and all others are heretical or unorthodox?

Matters of Indifference, and Matters of Preference

"Matters of indifference" do not include things that impact our salvation. They are matters that are not specifically *commanded* or *prohibited* in Scripture. They are left to the sanctified judgment and desires of each individual Christian – that is, they are issues of *liberty*, and of *conscience*. They can include moral issues. The context is 1Cor 6.12, "All things are lawful to me, but all things are not expedient." The word for expedient is the Greek *sumphero*, "to bring together." Some things bring us together, and some things drive us apart. As Paul goes on to explain his point (chapter 8), he gives us the difference between a believer with *weak* faith, and one with *strong* faith. Some things are permissible for the stronger brother, that might cause a weaker brother to stumble. The matter itself is indifferent; but it becomes a matter of importance when one brother's freedom causes another brother to fall back into bondage. And then in chapter 14, Paul tells us that "nothing is unclean in itself ... for all things indeed are pure" (vv. 14,20). These matters of indifference have a context. They concern **moral issues** between brothers – how we treat one another. They are things that our liberty in Christ allows us to do, like eating meat that's been sacrificed to idols. But liberty is not license when it comes to the well-being of other believers. So it's not about the subject matter, but the heart.

Most interpretative issues are *not* issues of the heart; they're *not* moral issues – they're not about what is commanded or prohibited in Scripture. The days of Genesis are not a matter of morality, or of causing a brother to stumble into sin. It is not sinful to believe the days are twenty-four-hour days. Nor is it sinful to believe there may be another intended or additional meaning to those days than a timed description of creation, where God's labor must necessarily be completed in 144 hours. This is another issue altogether. *By definition, it is a matter of indifference.* Some may think that it undermines our hermeneutic to look at it in any way other than literal, and sequential, with no time gaps before, between, or after.

And arguments can be made in support of that, using the usual arsenal of slippery slopes, emotional appeals, taking it to extremes, etc. But they are just that, argumentative techniques. They are methods by which to win a debate. What we need are proofs from clear testimonies of Scripture. We determine if they are valid arguments or not, by using our existing methods of interpretation. Regardless of our motives, or fears, or the argumentative technique that we use, if an interpretation is not a **necessary** conclusion, or if it results in an **absurdity**, or if it produces **contradictions** with other clear testimonies or settled doctrine, then it is suspect. If it does not do any of these things, and it is simply an *alternative* way to conceive of it, then liberty should prevail.

Absurdities and inconsistencies can be produced if we use the general to control the specific; or if we impose a systematic theology onto the text to force a desired conclusion. This is *inductive* rather *deductive* reasoning. If we let the definition of a word control the meaning of the text, instead of letting the context control its meaning, we can likewise get absurd or inconsistent results. Even logical inferences can induce an *unnecessary* interpretation, and lead to what some might call an absurdity. It suggests that we've imposed our preconceived notions on the text in order to derive our desired interpretive outcome.

When we begin our appeal with, "My God wouldn't..." or "The God of Scripture wouldn't..." or "It couldn't possibly mean..." we are likely hearing an emotional appeal, rather than testimony from Scripture. Now, any one of those three phrases may (and should) be followed with actual testimony, to prove that what is proposed is not an absurdity, or that it doesn't create an inconsistency. So it's not the *phrase*, but what follows it, that helps us determine the right interpretation. We need evidence to prove either that only one interpretation is *reasonable*; or else, that an alternative interpretation is also reasonable and supportable from Scripture. In that case, liberty should prevail; we don't need to take a stance between them.

The fact that we favor one interpretation over another is not determinative of the validity of a particular interpretation; it only reveals our personal preference. If it doesn't contradict our established *doctrine*, nor cause confusion in our established *practice*, it should be left open for discussion. If we don't *need* to take a stance on it, then we shouldn't append it to our orthodoxy, such that it bars any other interpretation.

The Birth of Death in Adam, and The Death of Death in Christ

Some assert that death did not exist for any living, breathing creature prior to the fall. Paul's statement in Romans 5.12 doesn't support that. "Therefore, just as through one man sin entered the world, and death ¹ through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned." The death spoken of is limited; it's tied to sin; and sin is limited to man. Animals don't sin; they're not under the Moral Law of God. A lion doesn't sin by eating its prey; it's not murder.

This is affirmed in Genesis 2:17: "but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die." It doesn't say, "death will enter the world." It is limited to Adam and Eve; the "you" is 2nd person plural in the LXX; the Hebrew is masculine, singular. They are one flesh, and therefore that's not an essential distinction. What seems clear is that eating of that tree is sin; and that sin will cause death. Eve affirms her own

¹ The Greek word is *thanatos*, from Greek mythology where this refers to the son of Nyx, the personification of death. It has several connotations: 1. The death of the body; 2. The loss of life; 3. The state of those in hell; 4. All those miseries which are the effects of sin, included in those other three meanings. What these definitions connote is that death itself is evil, only as it is the result of sin. The mere loss of life is neither evil, nor unnatural, except as it applies to man. So long as man remained in the Garden, in the presence of God who is the source of all life, he would live without end. But sin separates us from God; we are ejected from His presence and excluded from the Garden in which He dwells among us. And thereby we are no longer preserved from this condition of death. Is that mere *presumption*, or is it *testimony*?

understanding when questioned by the serpent. Genesis 3:3, “but of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, God has said, ‘You shall not eat it, nor shall you touch it, lest you die.’” “Lest **you** die.” Same as before, it is 2nd person plural in the LXX.

So there is a consistent testimony between Romans and Genesis, that death ensues for Adam and Eve, upon disobedience to God’s clear command. There is no evidence that death, as a condition, did not exist prior to the fall. We might assume that the term “death” would therefore have been meaningless to them, if the condition of death was unknown. “And on the day you eat of it you will surely *krolumate*,” whatever that means. Is it presumption to think that Adam was familiar with death? Or is it presumption to think that Adam was *not* familiar with death?

So where in Scripture might we get something to lend further insight into this idea of universal death, which otherwise clearly applies only to Adam and Eve? Perhaps it’s Paul’s statement that death is an enemy, and this enemy will die at the Judgment, when the world is restored.

The last enemy that will be destroyed is death. (1Cor 15:26 ^{NKJ})

O Death, where are your thorns? O Sheol, where is your sting? (Hos 13:14 ^{NAS})

Is death as much thorns and poison to the animals, as it is to man? Or is it a natural part of life; are some animals made for destruction, just as some humans are made for destruction?

Does not the potter have power over the clay, from the same lump to make one vessel for honor and another for dishonor? *What* if God, wanting to show *His* wrath and to make His power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath *prepared for destruction*, and that He might make known the riches of His glory on the vessels of mercy, which He had prepared beforehand for glory? (Rom 9:21-23 ^{NKJ})

Are there other testimonies to aid in our understanding? The ground itself (Heb. “*adamah*”) was cursed for Adam’s sake (Gen 3.17); and the earth itself yearns for restoration:

For the earnest expectation of the creation eagerly waits for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility,² not willingly, but because of Him who subjected *it* in hope; because *the creation itself also will be delivered from the bondage of corruption* ³ into the glorious liberty of the children of God. (Rom 8:19-21)

So Adam’s sin didn’t affect only himself, but all of creation was *delivered into the bondage of corruption*. OK. Does that **require** that there was no death prior to the fall? Is death (as a condition of non-humans and of the physical creation) part of the corruption described in Romans 8? Is it *clear* in the text, or is it only *presumed* on our part? If you look at the footnotes for the words *futility* and *corruption* above, you’ll see that they each have two meanings: one is related to *morality*, and the other to *physicality*. We can exclude morality, because only man is a moral being. And the physicality isn’t related to sin. In other words, the decay, corruption and destruction that is evident in the creation as we see it today, post-fall, does not exclude the possibility of animal death pre-fall. It is not a *necessary* conclusion based on these testimonies.

² The Greek is *mataiotes*, which in one sense is related to morality – it means devoid of truth, or *perverse* and *depraved*. That doesn’t seem to be the sense of the word in this particular verse. The other sense is related to the physical condition of something – it means *frail* and *weak*. That would appear to be the intended meaning of the word here.

³ The Greek is *phthora*, which again (see previous note), is related to *morality* in one sense (moral decay). Obviously that’s not the point intended; but alternatively, it is related to physical decay and destruction, perishing. Certainly death and perishing are akin. But fruit perishes, it decays, when it is removed from the source of its life on the branch or the vine. It breaks down, withers, and dries up. It can also wither *on the vine*. A fuse, when lit, is spent – the flame decays; a log on the fire is spent; its material is consumed – it decays into ash. That’s the meaning in this verse. It’s not “death” *per se*, but it is decay. The creation, cursed for Adam’s sake, visibly and tangibly decayed over time, in ways that were not part of the original creation. What exactly that means, is unclear and unspecified. The words alone don’t reveal it. What these verses are describing is not *animal life*, but *physical creation*; and therefore it doesn’t apply to our question about the extent of death brought about by Adam’s fall.

There are 359 other testimonies where the word “death” may be found. But we are specifically in search of testimonies about *non-human* death, *pre* and *post* fall. Sirach says,

All things that are of the earth, shall return into the earth: so the ungodly shall return from malediction to destruction. (Sir 41:13 ^{DRA})

That aligns with Solomon’s musing,

Who knows if the spirit of people rises upward and the spirit of animals goes downward to the earth? (Ecc 3:21 ^{CSB})

Who knows? In other words, no one knows, except God. To say otherwise is conjecture. It’s clear that all men are dead in trespasses and sins, and that all the elect are made alive in Christ (Eph 2.1); they arise to newness of life (Rom 6.4). But there’s nothing to suggest that when all creation fell into corruption, death was part of that corruption, and was previously unknown. Nor is there anything to suggest that death is as much the enemy of all *animals* as it is for *men*, and that it will therefore end for them at the return of Christ. Quite the opposite. If we are saved from death, delivered from hell, by faith in Christ — and animals cannot place their faith in Christ, and are not morally bound to do so — then there is nothing to support the idea that death, universally, ends at the Judgment. Nor is there anything in Scripture to prove that animal death will not be part of the new heavens and the new earth. BUT the presupposition to this, is that death was present prior to the fall. The one is tied to the other.

The issue is not the definition of the word *death*, or whether the condition applies equally to men as it does to animals. The issue is twofold:

First, whether the *effects* of death are different for men than for animals. It seems clear that the effects are far different. Animals exist; men exist *in relationship to God*. Animals, even if they will be present in heaven (and no one knows), were not made for fellowship with God; but men were. Therefore, at death men go either to heaven or hell. But animals are not destined for hell, because hell is designed to uphold God’s Moral Justice. Animals are amoral by natural and by God’s design. They do not sin, and thus are not subject to retribution for it. These are two very different natures, having two very different purposes, and two very different ends at death.

Secondly, is the intended message of the Bible about creation, or about salvation? Is the bible — is Genesis, is the Gospel — intended to reveal facts about creation, and about life and death as concepts? Or is it meant to reveal to man *specifically*, as distinct from *animals*, the nature of God, and the nature of man’s relationship to God? It reveals how *that* relationship was broken by sin, and how it may be restored by faith in Christ — the One who atoned for that sin.

Distinguishing the implications of death for men, from that of animals, indicates that the absence of animal death pre-fall is not a necessary part of God’s creation. Thus, death for animals may reasonably be distinguished from death for men. The one is natural, the other unnatural — the one is *without* fear and dread, the other is *with* fear and dread. Animals may live in fear and dread of *man* (Gen 9.2), but not of *God*. Why? Because “fear has to do with punishment,” (1Joh 4.18) and animals are not punished for sin. They are not under the Law.

Lions with Molars

Do the testimonies of Scripture force us to conclude that there was no animal death at all prior to the fall? Therefore lions were not lions as we know them, but something else, which needed no prey because all animals were vegetarians? Is this an absurd and unnecessary conclusion? Are there “logical” and “reasonable” inferences from the biblical text, which are not inconsistent with the Gospel, nor with our experience, nor with established doctrine — inferences which don’t require such conclusions? As we saw in the meaning of *corruption*, there is nothing in the fall that requires a fundamental change in the form and function of animal life, nothing that

requires lions to be something other than what we know lions to be. Adam's fall did not radically change man's diet or physiology in any such way. He was a vegetarian *after* the fall, just as he was *before* the fall. He wasn't permitted to eat meat until the flood (Gen 9.3). His corruption was in aging, disease, weakness, and depravity. To assign traits to a lion that make that creature radically different from the way God created it, is a supposition that is not required by the testimonies of Scripture, and seems to be controverted by the scope of Adam's changes after the fall. To assert that such radical changes occurred in physiology and creature habits, implies a second creation, or *re-creation*, prior to Christ's return. That is found nowhere in Scripture.

When Scripture says the wolf or lion lays down with the lamb (Isa 11.6), or the lion eats straw like the ox (66.25), these are not *literal* texts; they are *figurative*. John Gill's commentary, for example, says that Paul was the wolf, who given a new nature, then fed with the lambs.

To conclude that there were lions without prey, and universal vegetarianism by all animals, two presuppositions seem to be needed:

The **first** is that there was no death at all on the earth prior to the fall. As we've shown, the only thing that's clear, is that *man* didn't die prior to the fall. The Scripture is silent about the rest of the animal kingdom, and silence must not be the basis for any dogma.

The **second** is that God's provision of vegetation for food, described in Genesis 1.29, applies in verse 30 to all creatures. universally, because *all means all*, without qualification.

It seems clear that Genesis chapter 1, through Genesis 2.3, is one account of the creation; and that Genesis 2.4 and following, are a separate account. "This is the history... and (v.5) there was no man to till the ground." Yet in 1.26 God made man in His own image. Again, two accounts of the same creation, ostensibly for two different purposes – that is, to reveal two different aspects of the same revelation – two different messages, potentially having two different meanings or applications. Even so, verse 1.29 seems perfectly clear and unambiguous, that man is a vegetarian. And verse 30, *as translated*, also seems perfectly clear:

"Also, to every beast of the earth, to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, in which *there is life*, *I have given* every green herb for food." (Gen 1:30 ^{NKJ})

But notice the italics in the NKJ, meaning it's an interpolation; those words aren't found in the manuscripts. The question is whether "every green herb" was given to all those animals as food, or whether, in typical Hebrew fashion, it is an echo, a repeat of the green herbs mentioned in verse 29, done for emphasis. Hard to say. In English it is rendered *to* every beast, *to* every bird, *to* everything that creeps – prepositions that receive the action of the verb. They are indeed in the accusative case in the LXX. But what is the action verb? The translation makes "**give**" the action verb – but the word is not in that place in the original. Hmmm.

And the timeline is unclear between chapters 1 and 2. Is it possible that the context of 1.30 is the Garden, and not the entire earth, so that the animals of "the earth," are the same as those in the Garden – animals which Adam named (see below)? Hard to say. But the word for "earth" is the Hebrew *erets*, which can either mean "land," or the whole earth. So it isn't required that it be the earth universally, but merely the land spoken of. For example, "your blood will be in the midst of the land" (Eze 21.32) isn't referring to the globe of the earth, nor to the land masses on it. It's talking about the land they live in. So limiting it to the Garden is not "outlandish."

Verse 28 is clear that God has given dominion over all the fish, birds, and living things on earth. It may be that the "also" in verse 30, is emphasizing all those were likewise given to man to **rule over**. Not only are all the *seed-bearing plants* given to man for food – that is, he has dominion over them – but likewise those *animals* were given to him to rule over. That is, the action verb may indeed be "rule over," and not "give." Hard to say.

The rule is that we don't make an interpretation based on a translation, but on the original text. If the original text is ambiguous, even if the translation is not, it makes any interpretation *tentative*. It is to be loosely held, because it's not required by the text. It allows for alternative interpretations.

The Garden

In chapter 2, the other creation story – not different in content, but different in purpose – we find that man, **before** being male and female (see 1.27, and compare it with 2.7), was removed from wherever he was created, **before** there were plants or herbs (2.5). And yet there was a Garden that God had “planted” or established (2.8). Having prepared it, God “took the man and put him in the garden of Eden, to tend and keep it.” (2.15)

This is a specific place, established at a specific time, and apparently it is separate from the rest of the earth, and separate from the rest of the creatures – or at least separate from many of the creatures. So this is a *subset* of creation, protected and isolated from the rest. It is “paradise” in the LXX. It is an ideal place, with ideal conditions, in which Adam may come into the presence of God when God is there. But God is not always available to him.

When Adam named the animals (2.19), it doesn't say that all the animals on the earth were brought to him. It was those which God formed out of the ground, “every beast of the field, and every bird of the air.” Did that include lions, or only plant-eating cattle, sheep, goats, and deer? Were they beasts of the “field,” who ate of the fields, as distinct from predators? Hard to say. It certainly doesn't include the beasts of the deep. The point is that it was not **all** the animals. And that means there were animals that weren't brought to him; and therefore, there were other animals that were *not* in the Garden. *All* doesn't mean *all*. Here it means “some of all.” And therefore it is reasonable that there were predators outside the Garden, that were not inside the Garden. It is possible that there were animals who preyed on other animals, outside the Garden, **before** the fall? Hard to say – but it's not an unreasonable inference.

Reconciling Genesis Chapters 1 and 2.

Now, how are we to weave these two creation accounts into one coherent whole? The timeline obviously overlaps. Chapter 1 seems more general in scope, and chapter 2 more detailed. Chapter 1 appears to be factual and event driven. Chapter 2, though containing many of the same facts and events, reveals Adam's relationship to God, and his interaction with God, in ways that Chapter 1 is silent about. It is therefore reasonable to conclude that although both accounts are *historical*, the *purposes* for each are different. The message intended for the Israelite audience is different. And thus the meaning of what is said is subject to a different interpretation. The rules of interpretation are the same as to what is said, but the *conclusions* drawn must necessarily be different, because the *context* is different.

The days are in chapter 1, not in chapter 2. The things done on those days are more extensive in chapter 1 than in chapter 2. But the primary differences concern the interaction between God and man between the two chapters. We hear God talking to the heavenly host, and also “to them.” meaning mankind. But in chapter 2, God speaks to Adam and Eve intimately. The interpretation of each chapter, and of the two, is necessarily impacted by such differences.

Conclusion — Because the interplay between these two overlapping chapters is unclear, we must not try to make them clear. And the text being unclear, we are not only *permitted*, but I think *required* to be circumspect in the conclusions we draw from them as historical narratives. We should therefore allow for alternative interpretations, and need not take a particular stance, even though we may personally prefer one interpretation over another.