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# CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

AN INTRODUCTION  
THIRD EDITION

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ALISTER E. McGRATH  
University of Oxford

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## God as Creator

The doctrine of God as creator has its foundations firmly laid in the Old Testament (e.g. Genesis 1, 2). In the history of theology, the doctrine of God the creator has often been linked with the authority of the Old Testament. The continuing importance of the Old Testament for Christianity is often held to be grounded in the fact that the God of which it speaks is the same God to be revealed in the New Testament. The creator God and the redeemer God are one and the same. In the case of Gnosticism, a vigorous attack was mounted on both the authority of the Old Testament and the idea that God was creator of the world.

### Development of the doctrine of creation

The theme of "God as creator" is of major importance within the Old Testament. Attention has often focused on the creation narratives found in the first two chapters of the Book of Genesis, with which the Old Testament canon opens. However, it must be appreciated that the theme is deeply embedded in the wisdom and prophetic literature in the Old Testament. For example, Job 38: 1 – 42: 6 sets out what is unquestionably the most comprehensive understanding of God as creator to be found in the Old Testament, stressing the role of God as creator and sustainer of the world.

It is possible to discern two distinct, though related, contexts in which the notion of "God as creator" is encountered: first, in contexts which reflect the praise of God within Israel's worship, both individual and corporate; and second, in contexts which stress that the God who created the world is also the God who liberated Israel from bondage, and continues to sustain her in the present.

Of particular interest for our purposes is the Old Testament theme of "creation as ordering" and the manner in which the critically important theme of "order" is established on and justified with reference to cosmological foundations. It has often been pointed out how the Old Testament portrays creation in terms of an engagement with and victory over forces of chaos. This "establishment of order" is generally represented in two different ways:

- 1 Creation is an imposition of order on a formless chaos. This model is especially associated with the image of a potter working clay into a recognizably ordered structure (e.g. Genesis 2: 7; Isaiah 29: 16; 44: 8; Jeremiah 18: 1–6).
- 2 Creation concerns conflict with a series of chaotic forces, often depicted as a dragon or another monster (variously named Behemoth, Leviathan, Nahar, Rahab, Tannim, or Yam) who must be subdued (Job 3: 8; 7: 12; 9: 13; 40: 15–32; Psalm 74: 13–15; 139: 10–11; Isaiah 27: 1; 41: 9–10; Zechariah 10: 11).

It is clear that there are parallels between the Old Testament account of God engaging with the forces of chaos and Ugaritic and Canaanite mythology. Neverthe-

less, there are significant differences at points of importance, not least in the Old Testament's insistence that the forces of chaos are not to be seen as divine. Creation is not to be understood in terms of different gods warring against each other for mastery of a (future) universe, but in terms of God's mastery of chaos and ordering of the world. ✕

Perhaps one of the most significant affirmations which the Old Testament makes is that *nature is not divine*. The Genesis creation account stresses that God created the moon, sun, and stars. The significance of this point is too easily overlooked. Each of these celestial entities was worshipped as divine in the ancient world. By asserting that they were created by God, the Old Testament is insisting that they are subordinate to God, and have no intrinsic divine nature.

Having briefly introduced some aspects of the concept of creation, particularly within a Jewish or Christian context, we may now pass on to consider some of its aspects in a more theological manner.

For Gnosticism, in most of its significant forms, a sharp distinction was to be drawn between the God who redeemed humanity from the world, and a somewhat inferior deity (often termed "the demiurge") who created that world in the first place. The Old Testament was regarded by the Gnostics as dealing with this lesser deity, whereas the New Testament was concerned with the redeemer God. As such, belief in God as creator and in the authority of the Old Testament came to be interlinked at an early stage. Of the early writers to deal with this theme, Irenaeus of Lyons is of particular importance.

A distinct debate centered on the question of creation *ex nihilo* ("out of nothing"). It must be remembered that Christianity initially took root and then expanded in the eastern Mediterranean world of the first and second centuries, which was dominated by various Greek philosophies. The general Greek understanding of the origins of the world could be summarized as follows. God is not to be thought of as having *created* the world. Rather, God is to be thought of as an architect, who ordered preexistent matter. Matter was already present within the universe, and did not require to be created; it needed to be given a definite shape and structure. God was therefore thought of as the one who fashioned the world from this already existing matter. Thus in one of his dialogues (*Timaeus*) Plato developed the idea that the world was made out of preexistent matter, which was fashioned into the present form of the world.

This idea was taken up by most Gnostic writers, who were here followed by individual Christian theologians such as Theophilus of Antioch and Justin Martyr. They professed a belief in preexistent matter, which was shaped into the world in the act of creation. In other words, creation was not *ex nihilo*; rather, it was to be seen as an act of construction, on the basis of material which was already to hand, as one might construct an igloo out of snow, or a house from stone. The existence of evil in the world was thus to be explained on the basis of the intractability of this preexistent matter. God's options in creating the world were limited by the poor quality of the material available. The presence of evil or defects within the world are thus not to be ascribed to God, but to deficiencies in the material from which the world was constructed.

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However, the conflict with Gnosticism forced reconsideration of this issue. In part, the idea of creation from preexistent matter was discredited by its Gnostic associations; in part, it was called into question by an increasingly sophisticated reading of the Old Testament creation narratives. Reacting against this Platonist worldview, several major Christian writers of the second and third centuries argued that *everything* had to be created by God. There was no preexistent matter; everything required to be created out of nothing. Irenaeus argued that the Christian doctrine of creation affirmed the inherent goodness of creation, which contrasted sharply with the Gnostic idea that the material world was evil.

Tertullian emphasized the divine decision to create the world. The existence of the world is itself due to God's freedom and goodness, not to any inherent necessity arising from the nature of matter. The world depends on God for its existence. This contrasted sharply with the Aristotelian view that the world depended on nothing for its existence, and that the particular structure of the world was intrinsically necessary. Yet not all Christian theologians adopted this position at this early stage in the emergence of the Christian tradition. Origen, perhaps one of the most Platonist of early Christian writers, clearly regarded the doctrine of creation from preexistent matter to have some merit.

The central issue relating to the doctrine of creation which had to be debated in the first period of Christian theology was thus that of *dualism*. The classic example of this is found in some of the forms of Gnosticism, so forcefully opposed by Irenaeus, which argued for the existence of two gods: a supreme god, who was the source of the invisible spiritual world, and a lesser deity who created the world of material things. This approach is strongly dualist, in that it sets up a fundamental tension between the spiritual realm (which is seen as being good) and the material realm (which is seen as being evil). The doctrine of creation affirmed that the material world was created good by God, despite its subsequent contamination by sin. A similar outlook is associated with Manichaeism, a Gnostic worldview which Augustine found attractive as a young man.

By the end of the fourth century, most Christian theologians had rejected the Platonist approach, even in the form associated with Origen, and argued for God being the creator of both the spiritual and material worlds. The Nicene creed opens with a declaration of faith in God as "maker of heaven and earth," thus affirming the divine creation of both the spiritual and material realms. During the Middle Ages, forms of dualism once more made their appearance, particularly in the views of the Cathari and Albigenses, who taught that matter is evil, and was created *ex nihilo* by the devil. Against such views, the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) and the Council of Florence (1442) taught explicitly that God created a good creation out of nothing.

#### Implications of the doctrine of creation

The doctrine of God as creator has several major implications, of which several may be noted here.

1 A distinction must be drawn between God and the creation. A major theme of Christian theology from the earliest of times has been to resist the temptation to merge the creator and the creation. The theme is clearly stated in Paul's letter to the Romans, the opening chapter of which criticizes the tendency to reduce God to the level of the world. According to Paul, there is a natural human tendency, as a result of sin, to serve "created things rather than the creator" (Romans 1: 25). A central task of a Christian theology of creation is to distinguish God from the creation, while at the same time to affirm that it is *God's* creation.

This process may be seen at work in the writings of Augustine; it is of considerable importance in the writings of reformers such as Calvin, who were concerned to forge a world-affirming spirituality in response to the general monastic tendency to renounce the world, evident in writings such as Thomas à Kempis' *Imitation of Christ*, with its characteristic emphasis upon the "contempt of the world." There is a dialectic in Calvin's thought between the world as the creation of God himself, and the world as the fallen creation. In that it is God's creation, it is to be honored, respected, and affirmed; in that it is a fallen creation, it is to be criticized with the object of redeeming it. These two insights could be described as the twin foci of the ellipse of Calvin's world-affirming spirituality. A similar pattern can be discerned in Calvin's doctrine of human nature, where – despite his stress upon the sinful nature of fallen humanity – he never loses sight of the fact that it remains God's creation. Though stained by sin, it remains the creation and possession of God, and is to be valued for that reason. The doctrine of creation thus leads to a critical world-affirming spirituality, in which the world is affirmed, without falling into the snare of treating it as if it were God.

2 Creation implies God's authority over the world. A characteristic biblical emphasis is that the creator has authority over the creation. Humans are thus regarded as part of that creation, with special functions within it. The doctrine of creation leads to the idea of *human stewardship of the creation*, which is to be contrasted with a secular notion of *human ownership of the world*. The creation is not ours; we hold it in trust for God. We are meant to be the stewards of God's creation, and are responsible for the manner in which we exercise that stewardship. This insight is of major importance in relation to ecological and environmental concerns, in that it provides a theoretical foundation for the exercise of human responsibility toward the planet.

3 The doctrine of God as creator implies the goodness of creation. Throughout the first biblical account of creation, we encounter the affirmation: "And God saw that it was good" (Genesis 1: 10, 18, 21, 25, 31). (The only thing that is "not good" is that Adam is alone. Humanity is created as a social being, and is meant to exist in relation with others.) There is no place in Christian theology for the Gnostic or dualist idea of the world as an inherently evil place. As we shall explore elsewhere, even though the world is fallen through sin, it remains God's good creation and capable of being redeemed.

This is not to say that the creation is presently perfect. An essential component of the Christian doctrine of sin is the recognition that the world has departed

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from the trajectory upon which God placed it in the work of creation. It has become deflected from its intended course. It has fallen from the glory in which it was created. The world as we see it is not the world as it was intended to be. The existence of human sin, evil, and death are themselves tokens of the extent of the departure of the created order from its intended pattern. For this reason, most Christian reflections on redemption include the idea of some kind of restoration of creation to its original integrity, in order that God's intentions for his creation might find fulfillment. Affirming the goodness of creation also avoids the suggestion, unacceptable to most theologians, that God is responsible for evil. The constant biblical emphasis upon the goodness of creation is a reminder that the destructive force of sin is not present in the world by God's design or permission.

4 Creation as recounted in the Book of Genesis implies that human beings are created in the image of God. This insight, central to any Christian doctrine of human nature, will be discussed at greater length later (pp. 440–3); it is, however, of major importance as an aspect of the doctrine of creation itself. "You made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you" (Augustine of Hippo). With these words, the importance of the doctrine of creation for a proper understanding of human experience (pp. 193–5), nature, and destiny is established.

#### Models of God as creator

The manner in which God acts as creator has been the subject of intense discussion within the Christian tradition. A number of models of, or ways of picturing, the manner in which God is to be thought of as creating the world have been developed, each of which casts some light on the complex and rich Christian understanding of the notion of "creation."

1 *Emanation* This term was widely used by early Christian writers to clarify the relation between God and the world. Although the term is not used by either Plato or Plotinus, many patristic writers sympathetic to the various forms of Platonism saw it as a convenient and appropriate way of articulating Platonic insights. The image that dominates this approach is that of light or heat radiating from the sun, or a human source such as a fire. This image of creation (hinted at in the Nicene creed's phrase "light from light") suggests that the creation of the world can be regarded as an overflowing of the creative energy of God. Just as light derives from the sun and reflects its nature, so the created order derives from God, and expresses the divine nature. There is, on the basis of this model, a *natural* or *organic* connection between God and the creation.

However, the model has weaknesses, of which two may be noted. First, the image of a sun radiating light, or a fire radiating heat, implies an involuntary emanation, rather than a conscious decision to create. The Christian tradition has consistently emphasized that the act of creation rests upon a prior decision on the

part of God to create, which this model cannot adequately express.

This naturally leads on to the second weakness, which relates to the impersonal nature of the model in question. The idea of a personal God, expressing a personality both in the very act of creation and the subsequent creation itself, is difficult to convey by this image. Nevertheless, the model clearly articulates a close connection between creator and creation, leading us to expect that something of the identity and nature of the creator is to be found in the creation. Thus the beauty of God – a theme which was of particular importance in early medieval theology, and has emerged as significant again in the later writings of Hans Urs von Balthasar – would be expected to be reflected in the nature of the creation.

**2 Construction** Many biblical passages portray God as a master builder, deliberately constructing the world (for example, Psalm 127: 1). The imagery is powerful, conveying the ideas of purpose, planning, and a deliberate intention to create. The image is important, in that it draws attention to both the creator and the creation. In addition to bringing out the skill of the creator, it also allows the beauty and ordering of the resulting creation to be appreciated, both for what it is in itself, and for its testimony to the creativity and care of its creator.

However, the image has a deficiency, which relates to a point made in connection with Plato's dialogue, *Timaeus*. This portrays creation as involving preexistent matter. Here, creation is understood as giving shape and form to something which is already there – an idea which, we have seen, causes at least a degree of tension with the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*. The image of God as a builder would seem to imply the assembly of the world from material which is already to hand, which is clearly deficient.

Nevertheless, despite this difficulty, it can be seen that the model expresses the insight that the character of the creator is, in some manner, expressed in the natural world, just as that of an artist is communicated or embodied in her work. In particular, the notion of "ordering" – that is, the imparting or imposing of a coherence or structure to the material in question – is clearly affirmed by this model. Whatever else the complex notion of "creation" may mean within a Christian context, it certainly includes the fundamental theme of ordering – a notion which is especially significant in the creation narratives of the Old Testament.

**3 Artistic expression** Many Christian writers, from various periods in the history of the church, speak of creation as the "handiwork of God," comparing it to a work of art which is both beautiful in itself, as well as expressing the personality of its creator. This model of creation as the "artistic expression" of God as creator is particularly well expressed in the writings of the eighteenth-century North American theologian Jonathan Edwards, as we shall see presently.

The image is profoundly helpful, in that it supplements a deficiency of both the two models noted above – namely, their impersonal character. The image of God as artist conveys the idea of personal expression in the creation of something beautiful. Once more, the potential weaknesses need to be noted; for example, the model could easily lead to the idea of creation from preexistent matter, as in the case of a sculptor with a statue carved from an already existing block of stone. However, the

model offers us at least the possibility of thinking about creation from nothing, as with the author who writes a novel, or the composer who creates a melody and harmony. It also encourages us to seek for the self-expression of God in the creation, and gives added theological credibility to a natural theology (see pp. 208–18). There is also a natural link between the concept of creation as “artistic expression” and the highly significant concept of “beauty.”

### Creation and time

An interesting early debate within Christian theology focuses on the complex issue of the relation of creation and time. We have already noted the use of the image of “emanation” in early Christian thinking on the nature of creation, and its background in Platonic thought.

One of the most significant critics of this view was Augustine of Hippo, who held that the view presupposed or implied a change in the divine substance itself. In order to uphold what he believed to be integral to the doctrine of creation, Augustine argued that God could not be considered to have brought the creation into being at a certain definite moment in time, as if “time” itself existed prior to creation. For Augustine, time itself must be seen as an aspect of the created order, to be contrasted with the “timelessness” which he held to be the essential feature of eternity. This has important implications for his understanding of the nature of history, and especially his interest in the idea of “memory.”

This notion of “time as created” can probably be seen most clearly in Augustine’s musings in the *Confessions*, an extended soliloquy which takes the form of a prayer to God:

You have made time itself. Time could not elapse before you made time. But if time did not exist before heaven and earth, why do people ask what you were then doing? There was no “then” when there was no time. . . . It is not in time that you precede times. Otherwise you would not precede all times. In the sublimity of an eternity which is always in the present, you are before all things past and transcend all things future, because they are still to come, and then they have come they are past. . . . You created all times and you exist before all times. Nor was there any time when time did not exist. There was therefore no time when you had not made something, because you made time itself.

Augustine thus speaks of the creation *of* time (or “creation with time”), rather than creation *in* time. There is no concept of a period intervening before creation, nor an infinitely extended period which corresponds to “eternity.” Eternity is timeless; time is an aspect of the created order.

Augustine’s ideas have enjoyed a new surge of popularity and plausibility in the light of the new insights offered by modern cosmology. For example, consider the comments of the Australian physicist Paul Davies on this point:

People often ask: When did the big bang occur? The bang did not occur at a point in space at all. Space itself came into existence with the big bang. There is a similar difficulty over the question: What happened before the big bang? The answer is, there was no "before." Time itself began at the big bang. As we have seen, Saint Augustine long ago proclaimed that the world was made with time and not in time, and that is precisely the modern scientific position.

My concern here is not to enter into the specifics of this cosmological debate. Rather, it is to note that the new directions in cosmological thinking can prompt a positive and critical rereading of the Christian tradition, leading to the discovery that it already possesses resources which are relevant and appropriate to the new scientific debates which are taking place.

### Creation and Christian approaches to ecology

In the closing decades of the twentieth century there was growing interest in the way in which the world is valued by human beings. Some writers have argued that the exploitative attitude to nature, typical of the twentieth century, is a direct result of the Christian doctrine of creation. An excellent example of this is provided by an influential 1967 essay by historian Lynn White Jr., who argued that the Judeo-Christian idea of humanity having dominion or authority over creation has led to the view that nature exists to serve human needs, thus legitimating a highly exploitative attitude. Christianity, he argued, thus bears a substantial burden of guilt for the modern ecological crisis.

In particular, White argued that Christianity was to blame for the emerging ecological crisis on account of its using the concept of the "image of God," found in the Genesis creation account (Genesis 1: 26-7), as a pretext for justifying human exploitation of the world's resources. The Book of Genesis, he argued, legitimated the notion of human domination over the creation, hence leading to its exploitation. Despite its historical and theological superficiality, the paper had a profound impact on the shaping of popular scientific attitudes towards Christianity in particular, and religion in general.

With the passage of time, a more informed evaluation of White's paper has gained the ascendancy. The argument is now recognized to be seriously flawed. A closer reading of the Genesis text indicated that such themes as "humanity as the steward of creation" and "humanity as the partner of God" are indicated by the text, rather than that of "humanity as the lord of creation." Far from being the enemy of ecology, the doctrine of creation affirms the importance of human responsibility towards the environment. In a widely read study, the noted Canadian theologian Douglas John Hall stressed that the biblical concept of "domination" was to be understood specifically in terms of "stewardship," no matter what kind of interpretation might be placed on the word in a secular context. To put it simply: the Old Testament sees creation as the possession of humanity; it is something which is to be seen as

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*The continuity between science and theology*

The dominant force within Protestant theology in the nineteenth century was liberal Protestantism. Even in its earliest forms, as seen in the writings of F. D. E. Schleiermacher, liberal Protestantism showed itself to be committed to the reinterpretation of the Christian faith in terms which were consistent with the accepted wisdom of the age. Although Schleiermacher died nearly a quarter of a century before the publication of *On the Origin of Species*, his general approach was applied to the issue by his successors, such as Albrecht Ritschl. Liberal Protestantism thus argued that evolutionary theories allowed theology to appreciate the specific way in which God was present and active within the creation. Evolution was not inconsistent with divine providence; rather, it cast light on the way in which this providence operated.

Process theology is a particularly good example of a form of theology which has attempted to adapt the Christian tradition to the insights of modern science. Drawing on the insights of writers such as Alfred North Whitehead and Charles Hartshorne, process theology conceives God as the source of novelty and order. However, the traditional Christian idea of God as creator *ex nihilo* is treated with skepticism. Thus John B. Cobb Jr. and David R. Griffin prefer to speak in terms of God creating order out of chaos, and think of God as a source of novelty who produces order in the universe through persuasive love.

Although there are similarities between process theology and the ideas developed in the writings of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, there are also important differences. Teilhard de Chardin, a Jesuit paleontologist with an interest in the theory of evolution, argued that the universe is in a state of evolution towards more complex structures. In writings such as *The Phenomenon of Man*, Teilhard de Chardin declares that God is immanent within this process of evolution, guiding it towards its final convergence at "Omega Point" (see pp. 289-91). This idea of evolution towards a final goal is not generally typical of process theology.

*The distinctiveness of theology and science*

Partly in reaction against the tendency of various forms of liberal theology to accommodate to secular ideas and methods, neo-orthodoxy affirmed the distinctiveness of theology. This tendency can probably be seen at its clearest in Karl Barth's discussion of the doctrine of creation in his *Church Dogmatics*. For Barth, creation is a theological event, which cannot be illuminated or interpreted in the light of the natural sciences. Barth's refusal to allow philosophy to have any foundational role in theology is thus extended to the natural sciences. They have their proper spheres of competence; these do not, however, include the justification or explanation of the Christian faith.

A similar approach is found in the writings of American theologians influenced by neo-orthodoxy. A good example is provided by Langdon Gilkey's 1959 account of the doctrine of creation, *Maker of Heaven and Earth*. Gilkey here argues that

theology and the natural sciences are independent and different ways of approaching reality. The natural sciences ask "how" questions; theology asks "why" questions. The former deal with secondary causes (that is, with interactions within nature); the latter deals with primary causes (that is, the ultimate origin and purpose of nature in the first place).

The distinctiveness of the disciplines is also affirmed by Karl Rahner. Using a framework similar to that adopted by Gilkey, Rahner argues that the sciences are concerned with "*a posteriori* experiences," whereas theology deals with "*a priori* questions." Rahner argues that things begin to go wrong when scientists start playing at being theologians, and vice versa, in that they refuse to respect the distinctive characteristics and limitations of their respective disciplines.

Where neo-orthodoxy regarded theology and the natural sciences as having independent agendas and methodologies, some more recent Protestant writers have argued for the need for a dialogue between the two disciplines. Thus Wolfhart Pannenberg has argued that the insights of the natural sciences can illuminate the Christian understanding of the doctrine of creation. Although Pannenberg insists that the two disciplines are distinct, he maintains that they can mutually interact, to the benefit of both. Related ideas can be found in the writings of the leading Scottish theologian, Thomas F. Torrance.

Torrance argues that both theology and the natural sciences are committed to some form of realism, in that they deal with a reality whose existence is prior to their attempts to comprehend it. Both require openness to the way things are, and that their modes of inquiry are conformed to the nature of the reality which they encounter.

We are concerned in the development of scientific theories to penetrate into the comprehensibility of reality and grasp it in its mathematical harmonies or symmetries or its invariant structures, which hold good independently of our perceiving: we apprehend the real world as it forces itself upon us through the theories it calls forth from us. Theories take shape in our minds under the pressure of the real world upon us. . . . This is the inescapable "dogmatic realism" or a science pursued and elaborated under the compelling claims and constraints of reality.

In the case of the natural sciences, the "reality" is the natural order; in the case of theology, it is the Christian revelation.

The basic convictions and fundamental ideas with which our knowledge of God is built up arise on the ground of evangelical and liturgical experience in the life of the Church, in response to the way God has actually taken in making himself known to mankind through historical dialogue with Israel and the Incarnation of his Son in Jesus Christ and continues to reveal himself to us through the Holy Scriptures. Scientific theology or theological science, strictly speaking, can never be more than a refinement and extension of the knowledge informed by those basic convictions and fundamental ideas, and it would be both empty of material content and empirically irrelevant if it were cut adrift from them.

It will be clear that Torrance's approach is grounded in an approach which stresses the priority of God's self-revelation. This is seen as an objective reality, independent of human rational activity. Although Torrance is no uncritical supporter of Barth, this would unquestionably be one area in which he identifies with Barth's agenda.

*The opposition of theology and science*

According to this approach, the Genesis creation accounts represent a legitimate and valid understanding of the origins of the world, which remain valid in the face of the rival theories offered by the natural sciences. This view does not regard biblical and scientific approaches as complementary. Rather, it regards the biblical material as presenting a valid and objective account of the origins and development of humanity, which is in tension with theories of evolution - and, for this reason, says that theories of evolution are incorrect. This approach is particularly associated with conservative American evangelicalism. This general approach is increasingly referred to as "scientific creationism" and can be studied from writings such as Henry M. Morris, *Scientific Creationism* (1974).

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