

Scripture from Scratch

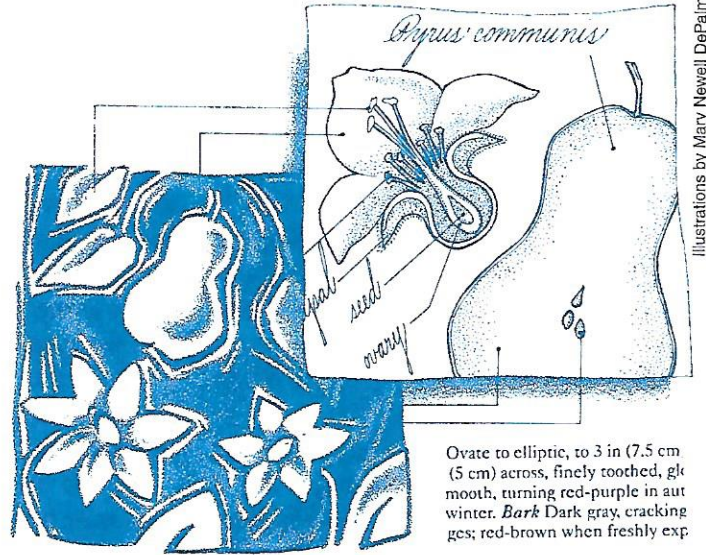
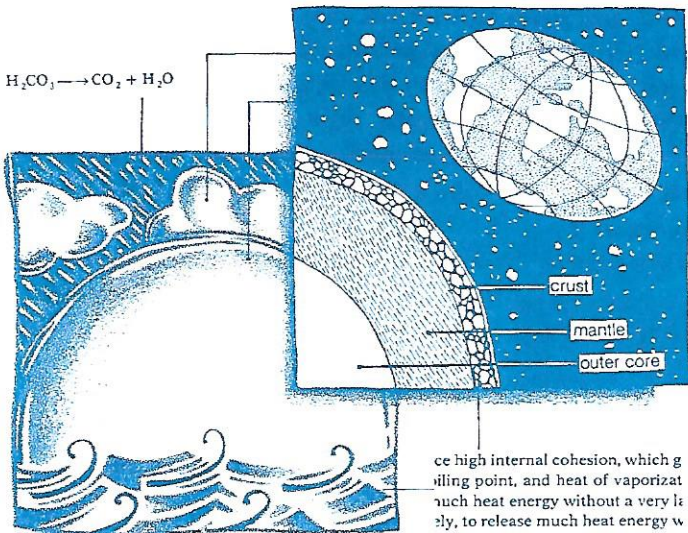
A popular guide to understanding the Bible

Creation A Work in Progress

Not long ago, I clipped a holy picture from a magazine. Like any good holy picture, this one drew me ever more deeply into itself. After gazing at it for some time, I came away with a profound sense of awe. Taken from NASA's remarkable Hubble telescope, the photo caught dust and hydrogen clouds some six trillion miles tall and four hundred million times farther from Earth than the sun. And what were these celestial colossi doing when captured by the camera? Fashioning new stars!

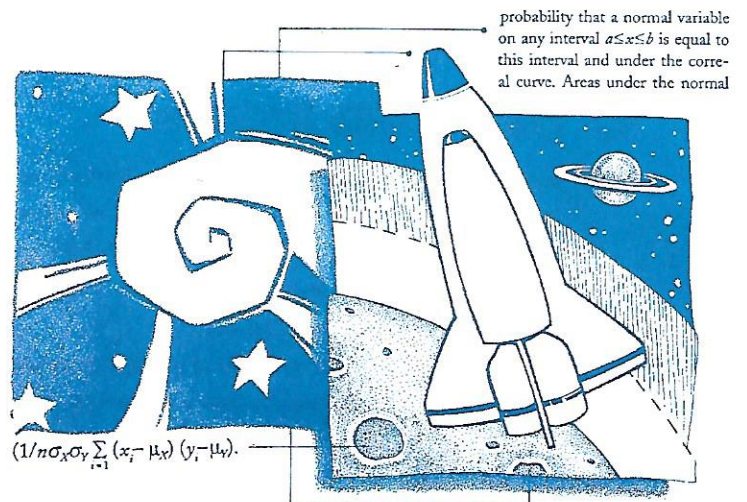
I have also had the good fortune recently to add to my collection of sacred writings. One such article dealt with our own planet and what the scientific community is learning about what lies beneath its crust. Another spoke of that incredible on-board computer called the human brain. Still another explained new findings in genetic research.

Holy pictures? Sacred writings? Not in the usual sense, I suppose, but certainly religious in that they expand my idea of God and creation. I bow before an intelligence that can both devise and execute a universe of such scope and complexity that we are only beginning to chart and explore it. I stand stunned before a mind capa-



Illustrations by Mary Newell DePalma

by Virginia Smith



ble of devising a distinct DNA code for each of the earth's billions of people and equipping them all with such intricate brains, eyes, hands and feet that even cutting-edge technology cannot duplicate them. God's creation is so sweeping that we have yet to plumb its farthest reaches. God's creation is so minuscule that it can only be viewed through a microscope.

"Mything" the Meaning

Sad to say, understanding of our creator God has often not kept pace with expanding knowledge of creation. Although logic dictates that God is the one constant, perhaps we subconsciously fear that changing notions of the universe may somehow change God.

Humanity has long wrestled with three great questions: Where did we come from? What are we doing here? Where are we going? The first of these, of course, involves curiosity about the universe. Cultures of all times and places have devised stories explaining how they came to exist. Lacking both scientific data and access to eyewitnesses, early societies expressed their concepts of creation in the form of myths based on what they saw around them.

Many of us are uncomfortable using the word *myth* in conjunction with biblical books, conceivably because we use *myth* to designate that which is patently untrue, e.g., "diet myths."

The sense in which we use *myth* in regard to creation is quite different, and leading reference works in Catholic biblical circles affirm this usage. Says *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*:

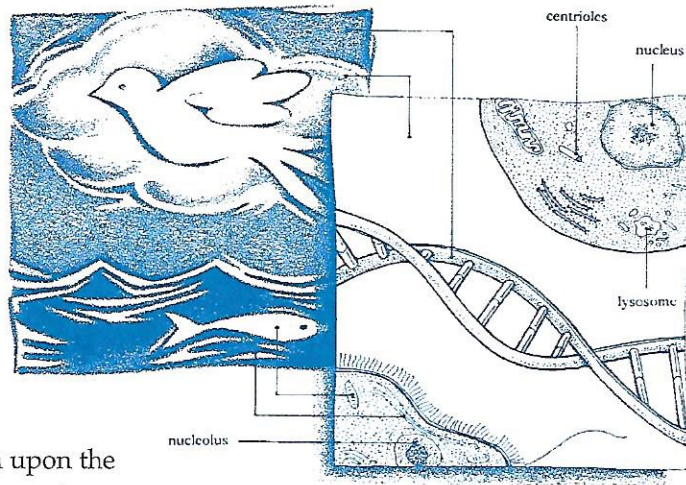
"Myth is an intuition and an act of belief. It seeks to impose intelligible form upon the realities that transcend experience.... Myth is couched in narrative, but the narrative is not historical and it is not intended to be historical.... Myth presents in a story the constant reality of the universe. It does not pretend that the symbol is the reality, but it proposes the symbol as that which affords an insight into a reality beyond understanding" (77:24).

Viewed in this light, a myth is decidedly true; it simply isn't factual. It is an often delightful way of expressing cosmic truths in common language.

One certainty is that creation stories always reflect the worldview of those who originated them.

Ancient writings, lacking formal titles, frequently came to be known by the opening words of the text, and so it is with our Bible's first work. Greek for "origination," *genesis* is usually translated "in the beginning," the first three words of the narrative.

To grasp accurately what is meant by the next phrase, "God created the heavens and the earth," it is essential



to see "the heavens and the earth" through early Israelite eyes.

In their worldview, the universe looked something like this: Earth, a flat disk, is topped by the firmament, a vaulted dome (Psalm 65:6-9). Sun, moon and stars move across the heavens or firmament (Psalm 19:1-7). The elements (precipitation, wind) are stored above the firmament (Psalm 135:7). Above these is the dwelling place of God (Psalm 33:13-14). The plate that is earth floats on primordial waters (Psalm 135:6). This structure in its entirety rests on supporting pillars (1 Samuel 2:8b).

Remnants of this cosmology linger in modern imagery. Winds are said to blow in from "the four corners of the earth"; travelers explore "the ends of the earth." The sun still "rises" and "sets." And, when asked the location of God's dwelling, many still point up.

In *Prayers for a Planetary Pilgrim*, Father Edward Hays suggests more illustrative terminology for contemporary Christians. Sunset, says Hays, might be more aptly termed "turn-around," better signifying the planet's gradual turn to face the far reaches of space, as opposed to the ancient notion of the sun's disappearance under the rim of a flat earth. Night could be called "look-out," a time of reflection and mystery when star gazers probe the spectacular array of heavenly bodies strewn across the sky. Day would become "look-back," drawing our attention to that celestial furnace that is our own star, the sun.



Praying With Scripture

- Many of the psalms emphasize God as creator. Psalm 148 is sometimes titled "Hymn of All Creation to the Almighty Creator." Others that might provide starting points for prayer include: Psalms 74:12-17; 89:10-13; 104:3-10; 135:6-12; 136:5-9.
- Use of books of prayer that challenge you to see both Creator and creation from previously unexplored vistas (see "Reading About Scripture").

God Created...God Creates...God will Create

Several years ago, I stood on a promontory overlooking the Grand Canyon. Long one of my favorite areas of Yellowstone National Park, I always enjoy listening to the remarks of others around me who are viewing this incredible panorama for the first time. I became aware of an implication that seems to underlie many of the comments, sort of "I'm so glad I got to see this now that it's done." Although no one said it in so many words, the idea that God had somehow managed to put the finishing touches on the canyon just before they arrived was unmistakable.

That episode started me thinking about how often we refer to creation in past tense: God created. Perhaps our thinking is conditioned by the Genesis accounts, which are peppered with over-and-done-with verbs. Our own experience, however, belies this notion. Creation is ongoing.

As I write this, the season is spring. All around me, grass is growing and shrubs are budding. Within minutes of the city limits, lambs and calves are gingerly trying out their unreliable legs. I couldn't miss the message if I tried: Creation is that which God has done, now does and will continue to do, possibly endlessly.

When humanity believed its domed flat plate to be the extent of the universe, it was reasonable to suppose that the end of that world spelled the end of everything. In our time, the

conclusion that hereditary factors (genes) separate in gametogenesis, and the recent cells contain two of each kind of chromosome



Living the Scriptures

- Visit a planetarium or simply sit under a clear night sky undimmed by artificial light. Take a walk in a familiar area, looking for unfamiliar marvels of God's creation.
- Examine your hand for evidence that "I am fearfully, wonderfully made" (Psalm 139:14a).

great eyes that science has sent to spy on space report that stars are dying all the time. This will probably be true of our own star and its planets as well. That this marks "The End" (roll the credits) is a lot less probable. God's creativity may well continue until...God knows!

Jesus' good news was simply that we need not be overly concerned about the cosmic future. Whatever happens to this little blue marble in space, we will survive...eternally. John 3:16 may well be the Bible's most popular verse, and the reason for that popularity could lie in its firm emphasis on God's promise: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life."

The Scope(s) of Creation

In the America of the Roaring Twenties, some of the "roaring" emanated from a small Tennessee community where public school teacher John Scopes was being tried on charges

of teaching evolution in the classroom. The heat generated by the so-called "monkey trial" was augmented by the fiery rhetoric of two of the nation's most celebrated orators, agnostic Clarence Darrow defending Scopes against Christian fundamentalist William

Jennings Bryan.

Scopes was convicted, but eventually was released on a technicality. This trial became a watershed event testifying to what some saw as the unbridgeable abyss separating science from religion. Hypotheses regarding creation seemed restricted to a literal interpretation of the Genesis accounts on the one hand and the Darwinist approach on the other. Two more contradictory viewpoints could scarcely exist.

Yet theologians and scientists have long explored the broad area between these diametrical opposites. Albert Einstein, acknowledging that there must be an ordered mind behind the ordered universe, once remarked that the probability that the universe came into being by chance was analogous to the notion that the dictionary originated from an explosion in a print shop.

Jesuit theologian Teilhard de Chardin saw the entire cosmos, ourselves and our planet included, moving through one state of development after another, culminating at the Omega point, the pinnacle of development.

Probing more deeply the mysteries of our origins in no way negates the truths expressed in Genesis—quite the contrary. Such exploration continues to astound and amaze as we add to our knowledge of the mind behind it all. However we characterize its literary form, certain basic precepts emerge:

—God creates everything in the universe, first to last, largest to smallest.

—Creation is essentially good, including us pesky humans. The word *good* appears eight times in the first

creation account, climaxing with, "God looked at everything he had made, and he found it very good" (Genesis 1:31a).

—Creation is inseparable from life. This affirmation, found first in Genesis, weaves through all parts of the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures. Death, whether of a distant star or the person nearest our heart, is never the last word. Life always is—more life...greater life...life to an extent we cannot yet fathom.

—Creation is completely dependent on God, but God is totally separate from creation.

—Humans, created in the image of God, are intended not to resemble God physically, but to mirror divine virtues and characteristics.

1+1 = Eternity

The priestly writer who is thought to have set down the first creation account in about the same fashion we have it today made use of a hypothetical week as a skeletal structure upon which to hang the various components of creation. When the enormity of an abstraction boggles the mind, we often find it helpful to situate it within a familiar structure. A seven-day week is easily grasped; millennia are not.

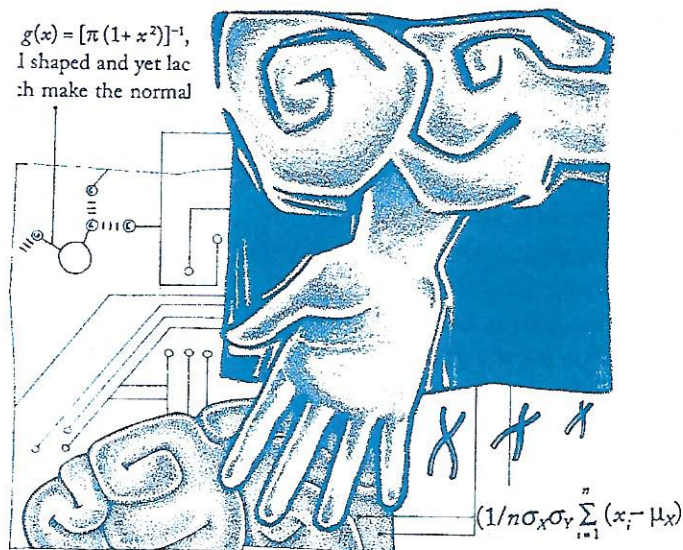
Astronomer Carl Sagan made use of

a similar device to demonstrate what is currently known about the metamorphosis of the universe. Sagan chose a hypothetical year for his purposes, placing the origin of the universe, predictably, on January 1. Our Milky Way galaxy, which we have only just begun to explore via space probes and cameras, came into being on May 1, followed by our solar system on September 9 and our planet on September 25.

December is the big finish to this amazing year; all life originates then. December 24 brings a rather intimidating Christmas gift, the first dinosaurs, but they're not around long. They're extinct by December 28. If you're looking for humanity's birthday, it can be found on December 31...at 10:30 p.m. So much for being the center of the universe!

Humbled and awestruck, we stand slack-jawed before our creator God, realizing that the more we learn, the more there is to learn about what God has wrought. Glimpses into heretofore unknown dimensions of creation continue to shed light on the generous and

$g(x) = [\pi(1+x^2)]^{-1}$,
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loving, dazzling and brilliant being who created them...and us. ■

VIRGINIA SMITH, one of the general editors of *Scripture From Scratch* and a frequent contributor, heads the religious studies department at a Montana high school. She has a B.A. in journalism from the University of Montana and an M.A. in religious studies from Gonzaga University.

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Talking About Scripture

- Suggest an acceptable balance between science and religion, recalling that God is total truth.
- What advantages does myth have as a literary form describing creation? Explore creation accounts from Native American, African or other cultures.
- How might a broader understanding of creation contribute to a deeper grasp of the nature of God?



Reading About Scripture

- *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (especially #279-301).
- Hays, Edward. *Prayers for a Planetary Pilgrim*. Easton, Kan.: Forest of Peace Books, Inc., 1988.
- Kramer, William, C.P.P.S. *Evolution and Creation: A Catholic Understanding*. Huntington, Ind.: Our Sunday Visitor, Inc., 1986.
- O'Malley, William J., S.J. *Daily Prayers for Busy People*, Winona, Minn.: Saint Mary's Press, 1990.