

WHAT ABOUT THE DINOSAURS?

The book of Genesis relates the story of God's creation of the world. It describes the origin of the earth, land, sea, plants, animals, and, ultimately, humanity. It goes on to tell how, in due course, human history developed through families, cultures, and nations. But what about the dinosaurs? A brief survey of the Bible reveals no explicit mention of the great dinosaurs. So, if the majority of scientists are correct in asserting that dinosaurs dominated the earth millions of years ago, then why doesn't the Bible describe them? Should this concern us? Is it possible that these reptilian creatures never existed? Or does this raise suspicion about the reliability of the Bible?

A few preliminary observations are helpful. First, no one disputes the existence of dinosaurs. Explorers have discovered fossilized dinosaur remains on every continent and the evidence is simply too overwhelming to suggest they never existed. So, we can rule this option out. Second, the term "dinosaur" was originally coined by scientists in the 1800s, so we shouldn't expect this particular word to be found in the Bible. If the biblical authors were aware of the animals we now call dinosaurs, they would have used a different term. Third, the Bible never professes to be exhaustive about the descriptions it provides. For example, there are no references to elephants or orangutans in the Bible, but no one suggests that it's incomplete or unreliable because of this. We simply conclude that either the biblical authors were unaware of their existence or there was no meaningful reason to discuss these species in their writings. The same could be true of dinosaurs, and, therefore, it shouldn't surprise us if the Bible does not address their existence.

Nevertheless, the question of dinosaurs and the Bible is part of a larger discussion among Christians about how to interpret the creation account in Genesis. There are two broad camps. Some take a literal interpretation of the creation story, believing it refers to six twenty-four hour days. They point to God's creation of the "great creatures of the sea," "every living and moving thing with which the water teems," "every winged bird," "livestock," "creatures that move along the ground," and "wild animals" on the fifth and sixth days and propose that this all-inclusive list surely includes dinosaurs (Genesis 1:21-24, TNIV). Moreover, literalists suggest that because God also created Adam on the sixth day and had him subsequently name all of the animals (Genesis 2:19), humans and dinosaurs must have lived together for a time. This may explain two passages in the book of Job, which many scholars believe relates a very ancient story. In Job, two mysterious animals called "Behemoth" (Job 40:15-24) and "Leviathan" (Job 41:1-34) are described. Literalists understand these passages as genuine descriptions of dinosaurs, although other scholars believe they may refer animals such as the hippopotamus and crocodile. If this literal interpretation of Genesis is correct, then the dinosaurs lived alongside of humans for a time and later died out from environmental factors or extensive hunting by humans.

Other Christians suggest a different interpretation of the creation account. They propose that the language used is more creative and poetic in nature and not meant to include statements of scientific precision. Therefore, a “day” may refer to a much longer period of time, or the story may be a poetic description that is more concerned with the “who” and “why” of creation than the exact “what” and “how.” This interpretation concurs with the majority of scientists about the age of the earth; in fact, some believe that evolutionary process is the method God used to create the world. If the creation account should not be taken literally, then no inconsistency exists with regards to dinosaurs and the Bible. Dinosaurs appeared on the earth and then became extinct millions of years ago before the first humans appeared (as most scientists believe). Dinosaurs are implicitly included as one of the animals of God’s creation in Genesis 1, but since this passage should not be taken in a strictly literal sense, we shouldn’t conclude that they coexisted with humans. And because the Bible largely chronicles human history, dinosaurs are not explicitly mentioned anywhere else.

One question may arise for those who take this second view: if death was a result of human sin, then how could the dinosaurs have gone extinct before humans rebelled against God? Though the Bible never directly addresses this question, it’s possible that death was an inherent natural process of God’s created world. It seems that plants in the Garden of Eden were destined to die since God told Adam and Eve to eat them for food (Genesis 1:29). God also gave animals the ability to reproduce and fill the earth and one wonders how the earth would have sustained unchecked growth without the process of death. And what about that mysterious tree of life in the Garden of Eden? When humans did rebel against God, they were forbidden access to it, lest they “take also from the tree of life and eat, and live forever” (Genesis 3:22, TNIV). Therefore, the creation story may provide clues suggesting death was natural for plants and animals, but that God gave humans the unique ability to live forever in relationship with him (though death loomed as the consequence should they rebel against God). If this speculation is true, then it’s entirely plausible that the animals died (and the dinosaurs went extinct) before humans turned away from God.

While the larger issues about creation may not be resolved anytime soon (and of course, there are other moderating views along the spectrum), we need not fret about the question of dinosaurs in the Bible. Either they are simply not mentioned (like so many other things), or their early presence is hinted at, but never fully explained. Perhaps we should be satisfied just knowing that such magnificent creatures existed, and that they reflect the greatness of their Creator:

“Praise the Lord from the earth, you great sea creatures and all ocean depths,
lightning and hail, snow and clouds, stormy winds that do his bidding,
you mountains and all hills, fruit trees and all cedars,
wild animals and all cattle, small creatures and flying birds,
kings of the earth and all nations, you princes and all rulers on earth,
young men and women, old men and children.” (Psalm 148:7-12, TNIV)