

Key concepts



The Hebrew word 'Bereshith' ('In the beginning') opens the Book of Genesis, and there is much speculation about the nature of the creative process in rabbinic literature. Analysis of Genesis 1:1 appears to suggest two different ways of interpreting the act of creation. On the one hand, the text suggests an act that constitutes the first instance of time, and on the other, an act in which God shapes the world from a pre-existent and formless matter.

Rashi proposes creation 'de novo' (creation from pre-existing matter); whereas Maimonides, in *The Guide for the Perplexed*, indicates that rabbinic commentary had reached no definite conclusion on the matter. He undertook an investigation through philosophical argument based upon the theories of Moses, Plato and Aristotle.

Responses to evolution are varied, many Ultra-Orthodox Jews reject the theory of evolution entirely due to their unwillingness to re-interpret scripture in order to reconcile it with a scientific theory. Some Kabbalists embrace many aspects of evolutionary theory as they are believed to validate their understanding of the origins of the world. The majority of Conservative and Reform Jews accept the existence of evolution as a scientific fact and interpret Genesis in the light of this information.

One of the most noteworthy contradictions between Torah and science is the age of the universe. Classical rabbinic tradition views creation as occurring 6,000 years ago based upon a literal reading of the Book of Genesis. However, some Jewish sources suggest that the universe is older than scripture would have us believe.

- Midrash Genesis Rabbah 3:7 notes that other worlds were created and destroyed before this present one.
- Talmud Chagigah states that there were 974 generations before God created Adam.
- Midrash Psalms 90:4 suggests that the first 'week' of creation was based upon a different time scale from human time.

Most modern rabbis accept that the universe is much older than that suggested by the Jewish calendar.

Key quotes

'In the beginning God created the Heaven and the Earth.'
(Genesis 1:1)

'The biblical calendar age of the universe is calculated by adding up the generations since Adam. This reaches a number slightly under 6,000 years.' (Schroeder)

'For in Your sight a thousand years are like yesterday that has passed, like a watch of the night.' (Psalm 90:4)

'Conservative Judaism has always been premised on the total embrace of critical enquiry and science.' (Fine)



Key words

Bereshith

de novo

evolution

Issues for analysis and evaluation

Key questions, arguments, and debates

The success of Judaism in meeting the challenges posed by science.

Science doesn't actually pose any challenge to Judaism at all, thus negating the question. The fact that there is evidence of much speculation, even within the Jewish faith, about the nature of the act of creation might suggest that Judaism does not hold a strong position that could be used successfully as a response to the challenges posed by science. The very fact that Jewish beliefs about the creation of the universe still retain their relevance in contemporary society suggests that Judaism has been successful in meeting the challenges posed by science.

Whether or not Judaism is compatible with science.

The argument that science and religion serve different purposes could be made. The belief that the Torah contains eternal truths is an important consideration. There is evidence to suggest a measure of compatibility between Judaism and science.