

Questions raised by Quora readers, related to the Bible, each followed by my response:

Is there evidence for the Jewish Exodus from ancient Egypt?

Short answer: Does it matter?

Longer answer: That we were enslaved in Egypt and escaped as a consequence of our belief in God's providence, whether true or not, and whether we believe it or not, is part of our "foundation myth" and is responsible, in large part for the principles that Jews stand for today and which we have stood for over the past three thousand years. We remind ourselves of this story continuously in order to fight against all sorts of enslavement, in order to hope that slavery of all sorts will ultimately disappear from the world, and in order to motivate ourselves to fix a broken world and work for a better world.

So did it really happen? That's a matter of intellectual curiosity, but ultimately is not really significant.

How many versions of the Torah are there in the world?

It is comforting to assume that all Torah scrolls are exactly the same, and that every scroll is checked by several people to make sure that it is exactly correct, letter for letter. Perhaps that is true nowadays, but it was probably not true several hundred years ago, when the output of scribes was not so strictly controlled and, conceivably, there were scribes who were less fastidious and/or didn't both to have their output checked by another scribe, particularly if the closest scribe lived several days away.

In the Talmud it is noted that there were two scrolls each of which had been used as a master scroll from which other scrolls were copied. But the two had slight differences between them, so they didn't know which one was the true master scroll.

In the Middle Ages, it is clear that the great commentators had slightly different versions of the Torah, since they quote the text in their commentaries, and sometimes their citations differ from our text. This despite the fact that the Masoretic text had been standardized several centuries earlier.

It has been suggested that when printing was introduced in the 15th century, the first ones to print the text of the Torah collected together a number of scrolls and whenever their scrolls disagreed, they chose to print that version which was agreed upon by the majority of their scrolls, and that effectively standardized the Torah text.

What did God create on the second day?

Where does the rain come from? Every child knows that water evaporates, that clouds are formed, and that rain comes from the moisture in the clouds.

But that answer is at odds with the answer in the first chapter of Genesis.

The main issue that concerned the authors of Genesis 1 was not the origin of species. They had no problem with that; each species was created on a given day, from day 4 to day 6, in some reasonable order. Their main concern was "Where does the rain come from?"

They were very aware that the rain comes from up there, but the questions that puzzled them was "How does the water get up there?" "Where is it kept?" "How does it stay up there?"

Now, we know the answer to those questions. The water gets up there by evaporation. The water doesn't stay up there, and so is not kept up there.

The writers of the Bible knew nothing about evaporation, and so they had to create a different and convincing answer to those questions. The answer occupies Genesis 1:6-10, which described the second day of creation and which most people skip over because they have no idea what is being discussed there. The Bible's answer was truly ingenious, and any person who really accepts the Bible literally should also understand and accept literally the Bible's answer, which we will call the "firmament solution," and should reject the "modern" theory of evaporation.

In particular, those who insist that the creation story in the Bible be taken literally should be challenged to accept the firmament solution literally.

Their hesitation to do so will be because the theory of evaporation was discovered in the 18th century, and widely accepted in the following years. This took place many years before the question of the literal correctness of the Bible arose and then became fundamental in the wake of the popularization of Darwin's publications and the objections to them as documented in the Scopes Trial of 1925.

In any case, as far as I know, no one in the 20th century suggested that the literal correctness of the Bible be applied to the firmament solution. The evaporation theory had long been accepted.

Now it is important to look at the ingenious solution to the problems related to rain that the Bible presents. Those who insist that the Bible be taken literally should be challenged to accept or reject this solution. The importance of the firmament solution is evidenced by its placement on the second day of creation, preceded only by the creation of light on the first day. We first ask how the waters could be separated into two portions, the upper waters and the lower waters. That is accomplished by the creation of a surface that divides the waters. Let's look at what the Bible says about the second day of creation:

"And God said, let there be a rakiyah (translated as "firmament" in the King James Version) in the midst of the waters, so that it might divide the waters that are below the rakiyah from the waters that are above the rakiyah. And God called the rakiyah "shamayim - heavens" and it was so."

The "firmament" has three functions, to separate the waters, to scoop up one portion of the waters and raise them up high, and then to keep the two waters apart. When we look up to the sky, the heavens are revealed to us and the hidden waters are concealed from us. The Hebrew word "shamayim" for heavens may well be a contraction for "sham mayim -- that's where the water is."

When did it rain? It rained when God created openings in the firmament and allowed water to fall through those holes. Thus in the flood story (see Genesis 7:11), "the windows of heaven were opened (KJV)"; these were not small holes like those in a shower head, but huge openings through which enough water flowed to flood the earth.

Accepting the "firmament solution" is a real challenge for Bible literalists, since they would have to believe in a pool of water up in the sky, a belief that is contradicted by all of our scientific knowledge. Rejecting the "firmament solution" is also a real challenge for Bible literalists since it would require acknowledging that not everything in the Bible can be taken literally.

Indeed, the literalists lost their very first battle with science before they even knew that it was happening, and they seem to be living very comfortably every day with that loss. So why the big fuss about evolution?

I've heard that the Bible talks about there being a "dome" over the earth. Is this true and where in the Bible does it say this?

That's correct. It's in the first chapter of Genesis. I've responded to similar questions before, but here goes another response. One of the questions that the Bible needs to answer is, "where does the rain come from?" The answer is pretty obvious, it comes from up there. But then the question becomes, "How does the water get up there ... and how does it stay up there?"

The Bible gives an ingenious response. There is a dome and the waters are divided into the waters below the dome and the waters above the dome. When God decides that there should be rain, small holes are opened in the dome, and when God decides, in a later chapter, that there should be a flood, then huge holes are opened in the dome.

For a few centuries we have understood that the water gets "up there" by the process of evaporation, but the ancients didn't know about that. So they developed their own solution, referred to in the King James Bible, as the "firmament." Now the question is, "Why don't those who take the Bible literally reject the evaporation solution in favor of the explicit literal statement in the Bible of the firmament solution?"

The answer is that when the evaporation theory was formulated there simply weren't any fundamentalists to object. So the fundamentalists lost their first battle without even putting up a fight. And now everyone accepts the evaporation solution, so the fundamentalists cannot object to it without looking really foolish.

So they have made a stand against evolution. If they were serious in their beliefs, they would also believe in the dome ... even though all the evidence is against it.

What do you think the Bible means when God said "Let there be an expanse between the waters, and let there be a division between the waters"?

The main problem that the initial verses of the Bible tries to address is, "Where does the rain come from?"

Now, we have known for about two centuries that the rain comes from water that has evaporated from the earth. But that was certainly not known in ancient times. So the Bible imagines that there is a pool of water in the heavens. Indeed, the Hebrew word for heavens — shamayim — may well be a contraction of the words — sham mayim — which mean "that's where the water is."

Then the question is, "What holds the water up there?" The answer is that there is an "expanse," usually called the "firmament" in English, that holds the water up there. The firmament has three roles — it scoops up some of the water that's down here, it holds that water up there, and it provides "a division between the waters and the waters."

Then the question becomes, "How does it rain?" The answer is now simple. The firmament has gaps that can be opened and closed, and it is God who decides whether to open them or not, so it makes sense to pray to God to allow water to come through those gaps. And if God wishes to flood the world because of our misdeeds, God can "open wide the windows of the heavens," as it is reported in the Noah story.

This solution to the problem of where the rain came from, the "firmament solution," remained the answer to the problem until we learned about the "evaporation solution," which now everyone accepts.

Why don't those who believe the Bible literally reject the evaporation solution and insist on the firmament solution? That didn't happen when the evaporation solution was proposed because there were very few literalists around at the time. Literalism is a relatively recent invention.

It is easy for the literalists to be creationists and reject evolution, but if they really took their literalism seriously, they would reject the theory of evaporation and insist there really still is a firmament up there.