

SOUTHWESTERN BAPTIST THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY

MY MAGNUM OPUS

THE DAYS OF GENESIS

PAPER SUBMITTED TO

DR BRETT DUTTON

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE

REQUIREMENTS OF THE COURSE

OLD TESTAMENT SURVEY

OLDTS 3313

BY

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NOVEMBER 18, 2002

## INTRODUCTION

The prevalent philosophy today is naturalism—the belief that everything that exists can be explained by natural causes. It totally discounts the supernatural. Naturalism’s chief doctrine, Evolution, explains all existence by the eternal existence of matter, time, and chance, while the Biblical view explains that God created everything as Genesis 1 recounts. One unfortunate result of naturalism has been its affect on the church. The doctrine of Creation used to be a great place of unity in the church, but new scientific theories have cast dispersion on the once clear, fairly universal, literal interpretation of Gen 1. Christians believe in Creation because they believe God’s Word is true. Hebrews 11:3 states, “By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things which are visible.” Not only does the doctrine of Creation explain the origin of life, but it is also the basis of many other doctrines, such as the origin of sin and plan of redemption and the substitutionary atonement of Christ. Creation is the basis for morality and human dignity. God is glorified in Creation, and thus studying it helps us reflect upon the majesty of the Lord. The following are just a few of the Scriptures that describe God’s creation. Psalm 19:1 says, “The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament shows His handiwork.” Psalm 146:5-6 says, “Happy is he who has the God of Jacob for his help, whose hope is in the Lord his God, who made heaven and earth, the sea and all that is in them; who keeps truth forever.” Revelation 4:11 says, “You are worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honor and power; For You created all things, and by Your will they exist and were created.”

## THE HISTORY OF INTERPRETATION

While the issue of Creation is seen to be a divisive issue today, it is so only because the church is not taking a stand regarding it. Throughout the whole history of Israel and the church it has been the starting place of great unity. The church must not be silent when it comes to issues that seem to be divisive. Increased, diligent study should be a Christian's response to difficult passages of scripture, not avoidance.

The way that godly men have interpreted Gen 1 over the centuries is helpful in ascertaining what type of hermeneutic to employ in the present. This is not to say that the correct approach will always be that of those who have gone before, but it lends credibility to an interpretation when godly men from the past agree. It is interesting to see that the debate that did occur over creation in the past was over the opposite position. "Early Jewish and Christian interpreters were troubled that it took God seven days to create the world, whereas modern interpreters are puzzled by the brevity of creation in light of geology's testimony to the age of the earth."<sup>1</sup> John Calvin in refutation to the thinking of his day (that God created in an instant, not over six days) stated:

*The first day.* Here the error of those is manifestly refuted, who maintain that the world was made in a moment. For it is too violent a cavil to contend that Moses distributes the work which God perfected at once into six days, for the mere purpose of conveying instruction. Let us rather conclude that God Himself took the space of six days, for the purpose of accommodating His works to the capacity of men.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Kenneth A. Matthews, The New American Commentary, vol. 1A, *Genesis 1-11:26* (Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1996), 148.

<sup>2</sup> John Calvin, Genesis, Calvin's Commentaries, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 78.

John MacArthur explains that the hermeneutic derived itself from the surrounding culture and philosophy. A similar trap seeks to entice Christians today, just with an opposite conclusion.

Augustine and others who shared his view went the opposite direction and foreshortened the time of creation to a single instant. They did this because they had been influenced by Greek philosophy to believe that a God who transcends time and space could not create in the realm of time... his views on the question were, after all, an accommodation to secular opinion.<sup>3</sup>

Note that people have a tendency to interpret according to the philosophy of their age. This has been the source of the recent conflagration of theories revolving around Genesis One. New discoveries in the realm of geology have caused many to abandon a young earth scheme for an old earth one in an effort to harmonize science with theology. “We have been too often bogged down in attempting to squeeze Scripture into the mold of the latest scientific hypothesis or distorting scientific facts to fit a particular interpretation.”<sup>4</sup> It is the opinion of this author that science should be viewed through the lens of Scripture, not vice versa. “The object of the person harmonizing Scripture with science would be to get the simplest scientific theory in combination with the most possible exegesis.”<sup>5</sup> All of the theories insisting on an old earth come from placing the authority of science over that of normal biblical exegesis. We must understand that “just as interpretations of Scripture are dependent on the hermeneutic utilized, so science depends on an interpretive framework for comprehensibility.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> John MacArthur, The Battle for the Beginning (USA: W Publishing Group, 2001), 71.

<sup>4</sup> Gordon J. Wenham, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 1, *Genesis* (Waco: Word Books, 1987), 40.

<sup>5</sup> J.P. Morland and John Mark Reynolds, Three Views on Creation and Evolution (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 73.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, 71.

Louis Berkhof rightly posits, “If traditional exegesis conflicts, not merely with scientific theories—which are themselves interpretations—but with established facts, re-thinking and reinterpretation is naturally in order.”<sup>7</sup> It is the opinion of this author that the scientific theories that have been accepted as fact should be reevaluated. The theories are interpretations of geological observations, and are in no way sufficient reason to reinterpret Gen 1 based on an old earth paradigm. A brief description of the several approaches to the days of Gen 1 follow and then an evaluation of that information specifically directed at the conflict between the literal and the symbolic/metaphorical interpretation of the Hebrew word *yom*.

#### DIFFERENT VIEWS ON CREATION

Theories on Gen 1 are greatly varied. Some are worthy only of mention for they fail to get to the heart of the issue surrounding the meaning of *yom*. Some scholars have proposed the creation account is an Eden-Only Creation. This view states that the six days only refer to the divine reorganization or rehabilitation of the garden of Eden. There is the Gap Theory which uses a large amount of eisegesis in order to explain the fall of Satan and an old earth. It explains a ruination of God’s creation between Gen 1:1 and 1:2, which then God recreates as depicted in Gen 1.

The Pro-Chronic or Ideal Time theory makes a distinction between real time and ideal time. The explanation is that Adam was made as a mature adult with the appearance of, perhaps, 30 years of age, but really had an age of zero. The same can be said of trees that God created.

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<sup>7</sup> Louis Berkhof, Systematic Theology (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1996), 152.

When first created, if the tree were cut down it would manifest tree rings appearing to be several years old, while in reality there were only seconds old. The concept is that God created things with an appearance of age. The same logic is followed to explain the apparent age of the earth and stars. Garrett discounts this theory based upon Geologists who are “unimpressed by such a philosophical distinction, [who] insist that real time and ideal time must be identical.”<sup>8</sup> The perspective of the geologists should not be the reason for discounting this position. Millard Erickson states, “The ideal-time theory is ingenious and in many ways irrefutable both scientifically and exegetically, but presents the theological problem that it makes God an apparent deceiver.”<sup>9</sup> Again, this conclusion is unfounded. How does this make God a deceiver? God explains very clearly in Genesis one that he made everything mature (trees already with fruit, birds not eggs, man not a baby).

Three major theories are as follows. First, the Age-Day Theory (or Alternate Age-Day Theory) explains that God’s creative work took a long time. Days are seen to be interpreted metaphorically as symbolic of geological ages of the earth. The Alternate Age-Day Theory just says that God creates in six literal 24 hour periods, but they are separated by eons of time.

Second, the Pictorial-Day/Religious Only Theory states that God created the universe and did so in a logical structure and left the “how” questions to science to answer. Advocates of this position feel that Genesis was not intended to answer questions involving geology, anthropology, and biology. Langdon Gilkey, a proponent of this viewpoint, states:

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<sup>8</sup> James Leo Garrett, Systematic Theology (N. Richland Hills: BIBAL Press, 2000), 364.

<sup>9</sup> Millard J. Erickson, Christian Theology (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 407.

Christian theology does not tell us how the universe came into being, but why God made it... The Bible does not help us understand empirical issues, whether of science or history. It serves merely to bring us into the proper relationship with God.<sup>10</sup>

While the primary purpose of Scripture is theological (God revealing Himself to man), it is the opinion of this author that whenever an intersection of one of the scientific disciplines and Scripture occurs, Scripture is true. Religious-Only advocates exhort people to marvel at Him who accomplished Creation (God), and not to fight over when it occurred. While it is true that the Bible puts the major emphasis on God's purposes in creating, it also is concerned with what God did and how He did it.

Lastly, it is interesting to see the way that the tides have turned in this debate. Even the categorization of the last viewpoint shows some of the disdain with which it is looked upon. The Naïve-Literal View explains that Creation occurred in six, successive 24 hour periods. Garrett explains that this "view seems to be contradicted by the very great age of the earth, for geologists claim that the earth is from four to five billion years old."<sup>11</sup> Once again, why is there such weight given to geologists' interpretations of rock strata as if it were proven fact, especially when there are other scientific explanations for those phenomena such as the Biblical account of the Flood? Edward Young makes a great retort:

If we label a first-hand impression naïve, we cannot do so merely upon the basis of our own independent and "autonomous" opinion as to what is or is not naïve. We ourselves, upon the basis of our subjective judgment, are not warranted in making such a pronouncement.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Millard J. Erickson, Christian Theology, 405.

<sup>11</sup> James Leo Garrett, Systematic Theology, 363.

<sup>12</sup> Edward J. Young, Studies in Genesis One (Nutley: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1976), 67.

## SYMBOLIC VS LITERAL READING OF GENESIS ONE

### Epistemology

*Yom* is defined by the Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon as “day as defined by evening and morning in Gen 1:5,8,13,19,23,31.”<sup>13</sup> As a measurement of time *yom* has three principle uses as described by the New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology:

- a. Its primary meaning is the time of daylight as distinct from the period of darkness, the night [Gen 1:5 God called the light “day”] The theological use is mostly this one.
- b. The term is also used for day in the sense of a complete cycle that includes both daytime and nighttime [Gen 1:5 and there was evening and there was morning—the first “day”]
- c. The term day is also used in a variety of meanings... to indicate the period of an action or state of being [Gen 2:4 “in the day” (meaning, when) that the Lord God made earth and heaven]<sup>14</sup>

Zondervan’s Pictorial Encyclopedia expounds on the third category of meaning, what will now be referred to as the metaphorical interpretation:

The word (*yom*) often is used in the sense of an indefinite period of time: the whole creative period (Gen 2:4), day of God’s wrath (Job 20:28), day of trouble (Ps 20:1), day of the Lord of hosts (Is 2:12). The plural is sometimes used in the sense of the “time of” as in the “days of Abraham” (Gen 26:18).<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Francis Brown, Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc, 2001), 398.

<sup>14</sup> William A. VanGemeren, New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1997), 420.

<sup>15</sup> Merrill Tenney, Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Corporation, 1975), 45.

An in-depth look at the metaphorical interpretation and literal 24 hour interpretation follows.

### Metaphorical Interpretation

As noted earlier, some Church Fathers expressed the opinion that the whole work of creation was finished in a moment of time, and that the structure of Gen 1 was merely a symbolic framework used by God to describe that creation. Recently, though, due to scientific discoveries, many have opted for the third category of meaning (*yom* meaning indefinite period of time).

There are several reasons given to further collaborate this standpoint exegetically. First, many will point out that the sun was not created until the fourth day, so *yom* could not refer to a period of 24 hours since it is made in reference to the rotation of the earth in relation to the sun.

Second, supporters of the metaphorical interpretation quote Psalm 90:4, “For a thousand years in Your sight are like yesterday when it passes by, or as a watch in the night,” and II Peter 3:8, “But do not let this one fact escape your notice, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years like one day.” They interpret this to mean that the days referred to Genesis one are “God’s days.” They explain *yom* to mean epochs, eras, or eons. Third, they claim that since the seventh day does not include the phrase “evening and morning” that it continues to today. With this as their basis, they go on to extrapolate that the rest of the days were periods of time, not literal 24 hour periods.

Are these reasons sufficient for a change in hermeneutic? It is the opinion of this author that they most definitely are not. It is only through the philosophy of today’s world especially that of gathered “evidence” from the field of geology that anyone would attempt to twist this meaning out of the word *yom* when the context supports a literal reading. In refutation to the above problem areas note the following counterpoints. First, while the sun was not created till

day four, there was a rhythmic alternation of light and darkness that God had made. God designed the periods of light and dark and then set the rotation of the earth to that preordained plan. What evidence from the text suggests that days one to three differ from those describes in days four through six? The same phrase “morning and evening” is used to describe the passing of a day. The reason some have done this is in an effort to harmonize Gen 1 with prevailing scientific theories about the age of the earth.

Second, Psalm 90:4 and II Peter 3:8 speak of God’s exultation over the limitations of time. He created time, and therefore is not bound by it in any way. This truth about God’s sovereignty and eternity does not refute the meaning of a day, though. Although God is above time, He has chosen to work within it. Psalm 90:4 and II Peter 3:8 were not meant to cast dispersions on the meaning of day, but to show how God is above time. Understand, as well, that if one persists in this faulty hermeneutic it opens a “Pandora’s box” toward the rest of the meanings of words in the bible, especially the word “day.” Certainly, under these false paradigms Christ’s burial for three days could be allegorized as well. Is there any limitation to the destruction that can be caused by this faulty presupposition?

Third, when God rested on the seventh day, He also blessed and hallowed it. The interpretation that the seventh day (God’s rest) continues to this day is based on a misunderstanding of the length of God’s rest. God is unchanging (Mal 3:6, James 1:17), and in this sense, He enjoys a perpetual rest that has always existed, even before creation. What is spoken of in Genesis one is God’s resting on the seventh day from His creative work which took place over six days.

### Literal 24 Hour Day Interpretation

Several scholars have stated that a shift away from a literal 24 hour day neglects the most natural reading of Genesis one:

The march of the days is too majestic a progress to carry no implication of ordered sequence; it also seems over-subtle to adopt a view of the passage which discounts one of the primary impressions it makes upon the reader.<sup>16</sup>

It needs to be affirmed that in the Hebrew Bible the normal understanding of *yom* is a day of the week. There are, to be sure, places where it may refer to an unmeasured period of time or to an era such as in the prophets' phrase "in that day," or to an unusually long period of time, even up to a millennium. The burden of proof, however, is on those who do not attribute to *yom* in Gen 1 its normal and common interpretation, especially when *yom* is always described as being composed of an evening and morning.<sup>17</sup>

Context must always be the standard by which the meaning of a word is derived. The immediate context is especially crucial to understand the meaning of a word. Wayne Grudem says, "the context enables us to determine which sense a word will take when it has various possible meanings."<sup>18</sup> An ordinary reading of Genesis one reveals a very matter of fact interpretation of a 24 hour day. If the meaning of *yom* is not a 24 hour day, a good question to ask is what would God have to do to communicate His creative work had He created in a week. How much more clear does the text need to be?

There can be little doubt that here "day" has its basic 24 hour period. The mention of morning and evening, the enumeration of days, and the divine rest on the seventh show

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<sup>16</sup> Derek Kidner, Genesis, An Introduction and Commentary (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1967), 54-55.

<sup>17</sup> Victor P. Hamilton, The Book of Genesis (Grand Rapids: William B Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1990), 53.

<sup>18</sup> Wayne Grudem, Systematic Theology (2000: Zondervan Publishing House, 2000), 294.

that a week of divine activity is being described here... Rather it is necessary to inquire more closely into the literary nature of Gen 1 and whether the chronological sequence and scientific explanation are the narrator's concern.<sup>19</sup>

To be sure Genesis has a unique structure. Many have noted the parallelism between Days 1&4, 2&5, and 3&6, where God creates a structure and then fills it in. For example, on day 2, God separates the waters below from the waters above, creating a firmament. On day 5, God creates the fish and the birds to fill in the structure. "The point of this deliberate and delightful symmetry in Gen 1 is that form is as important as content."<sup>20</sup> Also one notices the resounding pattern of God creating by His divine fiat, naming what He had made, calling it good, and the building up to the climax of the creation of man. While Genesis is written in semi-poetical language, it is not Hebrew poetry. "For one thing the characteristics of Hebrew poetry are lacking, and in particular there is an absence of parallelism."<sup>21</sup> A good contrast can be seen by examining Gen 1:6-8, Job 38:8-11, and Psalm 104:5-9. So while the form is unique and important to the writing, it does not discount the historicity of Genesis one, especially when considering the purpose of Genesis as a whole, to recount the history of God's creative work and His promise to His people. The latitude that is claimed by metaphorical interpreters due to the poetic genre of Gen 1 is unfounded. Genesis demonstrates some structural semi-poetic features, but must not be considered Hebrew poetry. It is primarily historical narrative, meant to be interpreted literally.

As previously noted, this literal 24 hour day interpretation has prevailed over the centuries. A few noteworthy reasons are now given and reemphasized.

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<sup>19</sup> Gordon J. Wenham, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 1, *Genesis*, 19.

<sup>20</sup> Victor P. Hamilton, The Book of Genesis, 55.

<sup>21</sup> Edward J. Young, Studies in Genesis One, 83.

- a. The primary meaning of yom denotes a normal day. A primary rule in exegesis is accepting the primary meaning, unless context calls for otherwise. The context of Gen 1, as noted above, does not allow or allude to such a change.
- b. The rhythmic repetition of one evening and morning goes totally against an epoch interpretation, unless one holds to extremely long days. If this is the case, one might ask, how did the plant life survive during the nights that lasted for eons?
- c. Exodus 20:9-11 and Exodus 31:16-17 describe God's command for Israel to keep the Sabbath. This understanding is based upon the way in which God created (a literal week with six days of work and one day of rest).
- d. How did man ever come up with the concept of a week? The year is based on the earth's revolution around the sun. The month is based upon the moon's revolution around the earth. The day is based upon the earth's rotation around its own axis as the sun rises and falls (from earth's perspective). The week's origin comes from the Biblical account of Creation. God created in six days and on the seventh He rested.

## CONCLUSION

The Bible does not state how old the earth is, and the question of the age of the earth is not the heart of the issue. What is the heart of the issue is whether God truly created or whether we, merely upon the basis of our observations of the universe, can place limits upon the manner in which God worked.<sup>22</sup>

The recent revisions to the accepted understanding of creation must be combated, not so that someone can exactly pinpoint the date of creation, but because the integrity of the Word of God is at stake. A careful examination of the hermeneutics involved in an interpretation is necessary. It has been shown that a metaphorical interpretation of Gen 1 is highly unlikely. It arose because of prevailing trends in modern society; competing naturalistic evolution has caused people to accept as fact that the world is very old, when the Bible gives another explanation. The standard of truth is the Bible, and as Christians, we must hold fast to it. Unless there is sufficient reason, we must allow the most plain, simple, literal interpretation to remain.

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<sup>22</sup> Edward J. Young, Studies in Genesis One, 102.

Recent geologists' interpretations of rock strata is hardly reason to reinterpret the clear, plain words of Genesis chapter one. In the words of Victor Hamilton:

For one thing, it allows the concerns of establishing concord with science (ever changing in its conclusions) to override an understanding of a Hebrew word based on its contextual usage. Furthermore, one would have to take extreme liberty with the phrase, "There was evening, and there was morning—the x day." Lastly, how would one possibly take in stride scientifically a major stage in the creation process that has an epoch which brings about vegetation preceding an epoch which brings about the sun and stars?<sup>23</sup>

Not only are plants dependent on the sun for life, but also upon birds and insects which cross-pollinate them, allowing plants to reproduce. The earth is an amazing ecosystem which depends upon an incredible complexity of interdependent systems. To lengthen the time of the days into eras in the name of science is to fail in two ways. One, it devalues the contextual meaning of the Hebrew word *yom*, a literal 24 hour day, in Gen 1. Two, it goes against true science, discounting the interconnectedness of all creation. God not only created everything, but He explained to us how He did it. Everything was created by His word (He spoke), and He worked over six literal days, resting on the seventh, the very basis for our week today.

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<sup>23</sup> Victor P. Hamilton, The Book of Genesis, 54.

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