

The Days of Creation

GENESIS 1:5

Rev. Dr. Richard D. Phillips
Second Presbyterian Church, Greenville, SC, December 13, 2015

God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day (Gen. 1:5).

There is a tendency in the study of Genesis 1 for scholars to insist that we should not expect it to teach science but only theology. Saint Augustine is quoted in support, saying that in Genesis God “wanted to make Christians, not mathematicians.”¹ The problem with this emphasis is noted by E. J. Young: “Inasmuch as the Bible is the Word of God, whenever it speaks on any subject, whatever that subject may be, it is accurate in what it says. The Bible may not have been given to teach science as such, but it does teach about the origin of all things.”² This being the case, Herman Bavinck urges that when the Bible “speaks about the origin of heaven and earth, . . . [it] deserves faith and trust. And for that reason, Christian theology, with but few exceptions, has held fast to the literal, historical view of the account of creation.”³

Science and the Bible

As we proceed in our study of Genesis 1 from God’s initial acts, we enter into the six days of creation, followed by the seventh day of rest. It is important for us to prepare by considering how to read the material that is organized in the remainder of the chapter. Since the main problems in the study of Genesis 1 lies in the conflict between

¹ Augustine, quoted in Edward J. Young, *Studies in Genesis* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1964), 43.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

its chronology and the findings of secular science, we must first arrive at some principles for relating the Bible to science.

God has revealed himself in two ways: through *general revelation*, that is, nature, and *special revelation*, the Holy Scriptures. In principle, we hold that they agree, having the same perfect author in God. With this in mind, Christians should be appreciative of science. Vern Poythress writes: “The Bible indicates that God created and governs all things. His wise and consistent governance is the basis for doing science. Science, rightly understood, endeavors to understand the mind of God and the wisdom of God in governing nature.”⁴

The problems come when the findings of science and Scripture conflict. In approaching this problem, we need to consider science rightly. Secularists often speak of *objective* science. But the data of science always needs an interpreter, and the human interpreter is never objective, but approaches data with bias and preconceptions. Christians further realize that human interpreters are influenced by sin, which promotes a bias against the truth of God. Young writes: “We must remember that much that is presented as scientific fact is written from a standpoint that is hostile to supernatural Christianity.”⁵

Another expression to reject is the declaration of *settled science*. Opponents of Christianity will often argue that evolution and other theories for our origin are settled beyond argument. But by its very nature science is never settled. At best, scientists work with a small amount of the overall potential data and must always be willing to consider new information. Mark Ross thus warns against the tendency to accommodate the Bible to science:

Those who think that Biblical teaching must give way to scientific teaching whenever conflicts arise perhaps have not given adequate attention to the corrigibility of scientific findings. Today’s accepted scientific “truth” might well turn out to be tomorrow’s discarded theory.⁶

In contrast to science, the Bible is the revealed Word of God, the perfect interpreter and source of truth. God possesses none of the

⁴ Vern S. Poythress, *Christian Interpretations of Genesis 1* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2013), 13.

⁵ Young, *Studies in Genesis*, 53-54.

⁶ Mark E. Ross, “The Framework Hypothesis: An Interpretation of Genesis 1:1-2:3,” in Joseph A. Pipa, Jr., and David W. Hall, eds. *Did God Create in 6 Days?* (White Hall, WV: Tolle Lege Press, 1999), 115.

limitations of human beings. He possesses all of the data, not merely a part, and was himself the actor in creation. Being holy in his perfect nature, God is always trustworthy. Therefore, while Christians should not easily discount the arguments of science, we should not place science in authority over God's Word. Poythress writes: "Since the Bible is infallible, we should give it the preference when conflicts between the Bible and science seem to arise."⁷ If nature is a book for us to read, John Calvin points out that the inerrant Scriptures are the spectacles we wear in order to read it rightly.⁸

Of course, just as scientists are imperfect readers of nature, Christians are also imperfect readers of Scripture. We also possess biases and are prone to error. The most famous example is the medieval church's opposition to Galileo's heliocentric theory of the solar system. Roman Catholic authorities pointed to Joshua 10:12-13, where God caused the sun to "stand still" and wrongly argued that the Bible teaches that the sun must orbit the earth. This was, however, a misreading of Scripture and the scientists were proved right. Citing this example, many evangelicals today are prepared to concede the Bible's teaching of creation to the supposedly infallible results of science. Instead, we ought to be willing to examine our teachings to ensure that we have not mistakenly interpreted the Bible. Then, once we are sure of the Bible's teaching on its own terms, we must follow the priority stated fifty years ago by E. J. Young: "general revelation is to be interpreted by special revelation, nature by Scripture, 'science' by the Bible."⁹

Non-Literal Approaches to Genesis I

Until about three hundred years ago, Christians were virtually unanimous in reading Genesis 1 as presenting creation in six literal days. Under the pressure of scientific opposition, this situation has shifted so that today large percentages of Bible believers are willing to adopt non-literal views of the creation days. This change occurred not because of more careful Bible study, "but as a result of accepting the truth claims of scientists over the propositional

⁷ Poythress, *Christian Interpretations of Genesis 1*, 14.

⁸ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Henry Beveridge, trans. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2008), I.6.1.

⁹ Young, *Studies in Genesis*, 54.

revelation of Scripture.”¹⁰ Today, there are a variety of theories that see Genesis 1 in non-literal ways in order to lessen or remove the conflict with science. The three theories that are most prominent among evangelicals are the age-day concordance theory, the analogical days view, and the Framework Hypothesis.

The *age-day concordance view* begins by noting that the Hebrew word for “day” (*yom*) does not necessarily mean a twenty-four hour period but can also describe broader periods of time. Conceding scientific findings of an extremely old earth, this theory posits that the days of creation may each be ages consisting of millions or billions of years. Taken this way, the chronology and sequence of creation in Genesis 1 may be seen as approximately fitting scientific theories regarding the development of the cosmos. Bible support is seen in Peter’s teaching that “with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day” (2 Pet. 3:8).

The problems to this view are serious. First, we should usually take a word’s normal meaning unless urged otherwise by the context. There is no question that the normal meaning of the Hebrew noun *yom* is a twenty-four hour day. The context of Genesis 1 agrees with this view, describing each day with the words, “there was evening and there was morning” (Gen. 1:5). Moreover, if Moses wished to convey the idea of creation ages, there are better Hebrew words, such as *dor* and *olam*. A further problem is that conceiving of the days as ages does not actually produce agreement with science, since the sequence and order in Genesis 1 remains at odds with scientific theories.¹¹ Finally, Peter was not teaching that the days of creation are long ages but simply that God experiences time differently than we do.

A modified approach to the age-day theory is known as the *analogical day theory*. This approach adds to the prior theory by considering the seventh day. First, it is assumed that since Genesis 2:2-3 does not conclude with the “evening” and “morning” formula, the seventh day is an eternal age without end. By analogy, if the seventh day is an endless age, the earlier six days may also be ages. The problem with

¹⁰ Andrew S. Kulikovsky, *Creation, Fall, Restoration: A Biblical Theology of Creation* (Ross-Shire, UK, 2009), 162.

¹¹ For a more thorough analysis of the day-age concordance theory, see Kulikovsky, *Creation, Fall, Restoration*, 148-153, and Pipa & Hall, *Did God Create in 6 Days?* 177-178.

this view, along with the problems already noted with the age-day theory, is its assumption. Young notes: “There is no Scriptural warrant ever. . . for the idea that the seventh day is eternal.”¹² It is true that the seventh day is a *symbol* for God’s eternal rest (see Heb. 4. 3-10). But in the Bible, a symbol and its fulfillment are not the same. There is nothing in the text to identify the seventh day as longer than the other six, so that the analogy is without biblical support.

Building on these two non-literal views of Genesis 1 is a view that has gained increasing support among Reformed scholars in recent years: the *Framework Hypothesis*. This approach follows three lines of reasoning to argue that Genesis 1 simply does not present a chronology. Henri Blocher asserts, “The author’s intention is not to supply us with a chronology of origins. . . . He wishes to bring out certain themes and provide a theology of the sabbath.”¹³

The first tenet of the Framework Hypothesis is that Genesis 1 should be considered as poetry rather than an historical account because of its obvious literary craftsmanship. There is, for instance, a pattern of 3’s, 7’s, and 10 for the major themes: God blesses three times, says “and it was so” seven times, and we read “God said,” and “let there be” ten times. Having already assumed that the days are analogous to long ages, and noting the repetition of “evening” and “morning,” Meredith Kline classifies Genesis 1 as semi-poetic, “in the epic tradition.” This structure, he argues, should cause us to view Genesis 1 as “figurative” rather than a “genuinely historical record of the origins of the universe.”¹⁴

A second argument draws from Genesis 2, which is said to operate by ordinary rather than special providence, involving normal rather than supernatural processes. Genesis 2:5 says that “no bush of the field was yet in the land and no small plant of the field had yet sprung up – for the LORD God had not caused it to rain on the land, and there was no man to work the ground.” Kline argues that this is a parallel account of the third day in Genesis 1:11, where the earth is made to “sprout vegetation, . . . and fruit trees bearing fruit.” This show, Kline argues,

¹² Young, *Studies in Genesis*, 78, n. 73.

¹³ Henri Blocher, *In the Beginning: The Opening Chapters of Genesis* (Leicester, UK: InterVarsity, 1984), 50.

¹⁴ Meredith G. Kline, “Because It Had Not Rained,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 20 (1958), 155-56.

that the plant growth of Genesis 1:11 took place by ordinary means, requiring rain to fall and man to garden, all of which could not have taken place in an ordinary day. Moreover, it is argued that Genesis 2 shows a variety of activity that could not have occurred on a literal sixth day. Adam was created and placed in the garden. God made the woman from Adam's rib. Along the way, God brought "every beast of the field and every bird of the heavens and brought them to the man to see what he would call them" (Gen. 2:19). Mark Ross asks: "If we take seriously that Adam did this with every beast of the field and every bird of the sky, is it conceivable that he accomplished all this in the space of one day?"¹⁵ Since Genesis 2's description of the activity within the creation days could not have happened in twenty-four hours, the literal view of the days is contradicted.

The third argument stems from the structure of the six creation days, which reveals not a chronological but a thematic relationship. Days 1 & 4, 2 & 5, and 3 & 6 are paired in such a way that God first creates an environment and then provides occupants. Or, as Kline puts it, God provides *kingdoms* and then places *kings*: on day 1, God creates night and day and, on day 4, he places lights to rule them; day 2 separates the sky from the waters of the earth and day 5 fills them with swimming and flying creatures; day 3 provides the dry earth and day 6 places beasts on the land along with mankind.¹⁶ Based on this literary structure, Genesis 1 cannot be seen to present a chronology for creation, but rather a poetic literary structure.

The Framework Hypothesis makes impressive points. However, each of its arguments fails under careful analysis.¹⁷ First, despite the careful literary crafting, Genesis 1 is not poetry but rather possesses the normal characteristics of historical prose narrative. In particular, it does not possess the kind of parallelism that is demanded by Hebrew poetry. Consider, for example, the Song of Moses, celebrating Israel's passage through the Red Sea:

I will sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously; the horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea.

¹⁵ Ross, "The Framework Hypothesis," in Pipa and Hall, *Did God Create in 6 Days?* 127.

¹⁶ Meredith G. Kline, *Genesis*, in *The New Bible Commentary*, third edition, Donald Guthrie, ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1970), 82-83.

¹⁷ For a full and detailed refutation of the Framework Hypothesis, see Young, *Studies in Genesis*, 43-105, and Pipa, *Did God Create in 6 Days?* 151-196.

The LORD is my strength and my song, and he has become my salvation; this is my God, and I will praise him, my father's God, and I will exalt him (Ex. 15:1-2).

Now consider the account of the first day in Genesis 1:3-5:

And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. And God saw that the light was good. And God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

The reality is that Genesis 1 bears little resemblance to Old Testament poetry but rather shows all the marks of historical narrative, primarily the *waw consecutive* construction with the prefix *waw* attached to verbs, signifying consecutive historical sequence. Furthermore, even if Genesis 1 is poetic or semi-poetic, this would not preclude it from recording true history, as the Song of Moses shows.

Second, the Framework Hypothesis wrongly relates chapter 2 to Genesis 1. The Genesis 2 account begins, "These are the generations of the heavens and the earth" (Gen. 2:4). This formula occurs ten times in Genesis, marking off successive narratives. This means that Genesis 2 is not a parallel creation account that contradicts Genesis 1, but rather the record of what happened afterwards, starting on the sixth day, when God was interacting with Adam and Eve in the Garden. Moreover, there is no reason to doubt that the events of Genesis 2 could have taken place on a single day, especially since God himself was immediately performing most of them. As for the animals brought to Adam, the various "kinds" of species had not yet experienced variation, so there would not likely have been thousands. Nor was it necessary for Adam to study every species, since God was giving him a sample to prove that among the beasts "there was not found a helper fit for him" (Gen. 2:20). There is thus no sound basis for Genesis 2 to deny a literal reading of chapter 1.

Third, the literary structure of the creation days observed by Kline and others provides valuable insights. We have previously noted that creation and salvation both involve God creating a home and then providing a people. But on close examination, the strict literary framework breaks down and does not disprove the validity of the historical chronology in Genesis 1. As Noel Weeks writes: "The claim that careful structure in the composition means that the passage is

not to be taken literally is nothing more than a claim. How do we know that structure and literalness are incompatible?”¹⁸

The common thread to all the non-literal interpretation of Genesis 1 is that they reinterpret the text for the primary cause of avoiding conflict with secular science, including the theory of evolution. Henri Blocher frankly admits this motivation: “The rejection of all the theories accepted by the scientists requires considerable bravado. . . . current opinions, built on the studies of thousands of research scientists who keep a very close eye on one another, continue to look very probable.”¹⁹ In his support for the non-literal views, Tim Keller states this very aim: “To account for evolution we must see at least Genesis 1 as non-literal.”²⁰ It should not, however, be the Christian’s goal to accommodate the Bible to the theories of men, especially those fundamentally at odds with the message of Scripture.

Evidence for the Literal Chronology of Genesis I

Having rejected the non-literal accounts of Genesis 1, we must now provide solid evidence for a literal chronology of creation. Let me provide five lines of evidence.

The first two have already been mentioned. First, the *genre* of Genesis 1 is straightforward historical prose narrative, not poetry, however elaborate its construction may be. Its basic structure is the same as the other 49 chapters of Genesis and, as history, it should be read as a record of authentic events. Geerhardus Vos observes the danger to the entire Bible if Genesis 1 can be discarded as history: “If the creation history is an allegory, then the narrative concerning the fall and everything further that follows can also be allegory.”²¹ Derek Kidner thus comments “that the author shows no consciousness of speaking otherwise than literally.”²² Second, the *grammar* of Genesis 1, with the *waw consecutive* construction of “and + verb” marks a sequence of events wherever this grammatical structure is found in the Old Testament.

¹⁸ Noel Weeks, *The Sufficiency of Scripture* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1988), 107.

¹⁹ Blocher, *In the Beginning*, 48.

²⁰ Tim Keller, “Creation, Evolution, and Christian Laypeople,” *The Biologos Foundation*, p. 2. Accessed on-line at: https://biologos.org/uploads/projects/Keller_white_paper.pdf.

²¹ Geerhardus Vos, *Reformed Dogmatics*, trans. Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 1:161

²² Derek Kidner, *Genesis*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 1967), 61.

Third, the *numbering* of the creation days identifies them as normal, twenty-four hour days. Joseph Pipa writes: “the use of ‘day’ with the ordinal number demands a sequential reading. . . . When an ordinal number is used with *yom*, not one example of non-sequence can be found.”²³ Thus, the fact that Genesis 1 numbers the days as first, second, and so on, gives the normal impression of ordinary days.

Fourth, we note that the *context* of the days is marked by the words “evening and morning.” This signifies the period of darkness and the breaking of dawn that ends the day which began with the creation of light. Keil and Delitzsch observe: “if the days of creation are regulated by the recurring interchange of light and darkness, they must be regarded not as periods of time of incalculable duration, or years or thousands of years, but as simple earthly days.”²⁴ Critics answer that morning light requires the sun, which is not created until day 4, and that an earth day is defined by the rotation of the planet on its axis. In answering, the Christian does not at all deny the special providence that is involved throughout these supernatural creation events. The reality is, however, that God’s revelation of creation is presented in normal, twenty-four hour day periods.

Fifth, when the Bible later looks back on Genesis’ creation story, it regards the events as historically literal. Paul pointed out that in the beginning, God said, “Let light shine out of darkness” (2 Cor. 4:6), validating the historical claim of Genesis 1:3. In Matthew 19:4, Jesus spoke of Adam and Eve as historical persons. Psalm 33:6 corroborates the claim of Genesis 1: “By the word of the LORD the heavens were made, and by the breath of his mouth all their host” (Ps. 33:6).

Most telling is the language of the Fourth Commandment (Ex. 20:8-11). We are to imitate God’s creation pattern by working six days and resting on the seventh day: “For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day” (Ex. 20:11). The logic is that we must do as God himself did. We are to work for six literal days each week, resting on the seventh, to imitate what God did on the original days of creation.

²³ Pipa, *Did God Create in 6 Days?* 180-81. This section follows Pipa’s argument in pages 179-187,

²⁴ C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, 10 vols. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1866, reprint 1996), 1:3.

Armed with this evidence – Genesis 1’s historical genre, its narrative grammar, the numbering of the days, the context of evening and morning, together with the agreement of the rest of Scripture – Christians may be confident in reading the days of Genesis 1 as literal, twenty-four hour periods. Instructed by God’s Word, we stand humbly but confidently before the contrary teaching of science.

How, then, do we answer science’s teaching that the universe is billions of years old rather than the thousands of years indicated by Scripture? Some Christian scientists answer with Bible-based scientific theories that support Genesis 1. Consider, for instance, the light that shines from the nearby Andromeda galaxy, a mere 2.5 million light years away. Based on a constant speed of light, scientists reasonably argue that we are looking at light that has shined for millions of years. One response has been suggested by Christian scientist C. Stuart Patterson, who presents evidence that the speed of light has actually been slowing down. If the speed of light was exponentially faster at the dawn of creation, the resulting revision to science would agree with Scripture.²⁵

It is beyond the competence of most Bible scholars to assess this or other scientific arguments. But there are other ways to reduce or explain the conflict. Vern Poythress argues a “mature creation” approach, noting that Adam seems to have been created in a mature, adult form, rather than growing from infancy. By analogy, there is no reason why God could not have created the universe with a mature appearance, including light already in motion from distant stars. “If so,” Poythress writes, “the age estimates from modern science, such as 4.5 billion years for the earth and 14 billion years for the universe, are simply coherent instances of apparent age.”²⁶

This kind of reasoning, together with alternative scientific theories, may help to bridge the gap between Bible believers and scientists, although the secular hostility to Christianity makes this difficult in practice. Nonetheless, Christians must stand steadfastly and confidently on God’s Word, knowing, as Psalm 119:130 says, “The unfolding of your words gives light.”

²⁵ C. Stuart Patterson, “Evidences for a Young Earth,” in Pipa and Hall, *Did God Create in 6 Days?* 316-17.

²⁶ Poythress, *Christian Interpretations of Genesis 1*, 7.

Creation and the Gospel

As we conclude our analysis of the creation days, we may return to Augustine's original question: is the Bible designed to create mathematicians or Christians? The answer is that we have done virtually no science but have instead considered how to handle the Scriptures correctly. Rightly interpreting the Bible is, of course, of the greatest importance to followers of Jesus. We began by pointing out the superiority of God's Word compared to any mere human authority, and we have sought to understand Genesis 1 on its own terms. Only having read the Bible faithfully do we consider the claims of the world and seek to answer its objections.

It hardly needs to be said that this same discipline and faithfulness is essential to our reading the Gospel accounts of Jesus Christ. For the world that rejects biblical creation and a literal Adam and Eve is not better disposed to Bible's record of Christ. The same naturalistic secularism has assailed Jesus' virgin birth, sin-atonement death, bodily resurrection, ascension to heaven and imminent return to earth. Moreover, the very kinds of arguments made by Christians to discount the historicity of Genesis 1 are used by unbelievers to allegorize the Gospels, which like Genesis involve careful literary construction and dramatic elements. The Gospel of John, for instance, involves intense literary structuring, highlighting exodus motifs, the feast schedule of Old Testament Israel, and the "I am" statements of Christ. It features dramatic events and miraculous claims. It concludes in the bodily resurrection of Christ which is ridiculed by today's science. Does this mean that John's Gospel is not literally true? And if it is not history, but a mere literary structure, what is left of Christian faith?

The distinctive feature of the Christian faith is that its doctrines stem from historical events that really happened. This feature is true of the creation account as well as the cross of Christ. Moreover, if Christians accept a version of our origins that is at odds with Genesis 1, we have not made a tactically wise compromise but have recast the grand story of the entire Bible. Without a historical Genesis 1 there is no literal Adam and Eve. Without our first parents there is no fall into sin as the great problem of life. In that case, the mission ascribed to Jesus in dying for our forgiveness bears no meaning and little

relevance to a world that is simply about something else. The Bible's message of creation – fall – redemption starts with an historical account of creation that is simply indispensable to our faith.

Augustine was right in asserting that Genesis was written to create Christians, not mathematicians. And according to the New Testament, the story of Jesus begins in Genesis 1: “In the beginning was the Word” (Jn. 1:1-2). At Bible's end, Jesus wrapped up all history, saying, “I am the first and the last, and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore” (Rev. 1:17-18). These are historical claims, presented by God's Word together with all of the Bible's claims, which we set before a skeptical world. We proclaim them, trusting that Christ, through the power by which he spoke all things into being in the days of creation, will speak the word of the new birth into the hearts of men and women, so that by believing the truth of God's Word they will be saved.