

EXCURSUS

THE DAYS OF CREATION

As noted in the lesson, the common way of teaching Genesis 1:1-2:3 is to jump right into discussing the Days of Creation. We deviated from that approach to discuss the more fundamental truths of the creation account that are key in laying the groundwork for a biblically Christian worldview. Nevertheless, there still remains the question of how to rightly understand the Days of Creation, as that affects how we view the reliability of Scripture.

I. The Different Views for the Days of Creation

The Westminster Confession of Faith IV.1, the Larger Catechism 15 and the Shorter Catechism 9 all state that God created “the world and all things therein... in the space of six days,” but the question arises as to how one should understand “in the space of six days,” whether literally or otherwise. Although the question of the length of the Days of Creation is now a major issue in Christian circles, historically it did not come on the scene until the mid-seventeenth century, which is relatively recent. This came about with the development of the scientific method and the subsequent European Enlightenment, when critics of Christianity began dismissing the faith because it was purportedly incompatible with a “scientific” understanding of creation and the world. By the late nineteenth century, and especially after Charles Darwin posited naturalistic evolution, questions about the Genesis creation account have become intertwined with those regarding the inerrancy of Scripture. For this reason, conservative Christians have consistently affirmed that the Genesis account is both *truthful* (because it is Scriptural, assuming the infallibility of Scripture) and *historical*. These two criteria are essential to any orthodox biblical understanding of the creation account. In light of these criteria, conservative Christians have put forward six interpretive positions to explain what is meant by the “Days of Creation” in Genesis.¹

Calendar Day (or “Six Day”) Creation. This interpretation sees the evening and morning references as demarcating the days into six literal 24-hour days, with creation progressing according to the linear sequence of the week of creation. This position tends to be associated with a “young earth” scientific perspective. It reflects a *prima facie* reading of the text that even opponents of the position clearly recognize. As such, it is probably the default position for most conservative Christians today.

¹ The Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) and the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC) both have produced study committee reports on the Days of Creation that go into detail on the description of and arguments for the respective positions. The PCA report can be found at <https://www.pcahistory.org/pca/digest/studies/creation/report.html> and the OPC report is at <https://opc.org/GA/creation.html>. Both reports were undertaken because the denominations needed to determine what positions could be considered acceptable for ordination candidates to hold in subscribing to the Westminster Standards. Neither denomination rules out any of these positions or advocates one as preferred.

Day Age View. This is probably the most common alternative to the Calendar Day view and really came into being in the last 200 years. It is based on 2 Pet. 3:8, which says that with the Lord one day is like 1,000 years. It holds that the days of creation represent long periods of time—possibly even geological ages—are chronologically sequenced, and may overlap. This is a non-literal view. Hugh Ross (“Answers in Genesis”), E. J. Young, and Gleason Archer have been prominent advocates of this view in our day.

Framework View. This view emphasizes the literary structuring of the Days of Creation, with the first three days understood as days of forming and the second three days as days of filling. It interprets differences between Genesis chapters 1 and 2 as indicative of a literary, non-literal, topical arrangement, rather than a chronological one, with the focus being on the God who creates than on how creation was created. This view is mostly associated with scholars such as Meredith G. Kline, Mark Futato, and to a lesser degree, Bruce Waltke.

Analogous Days View. In this position, the days are seen as God’s working days, analogous to human working days. This hypothesis has only really emerged in the last couple decades and comes out of an academic literary approach known as Discourse Theory. As with the Day Age and Framework views, it is non-literal. Because it is still so recent, support is limited mostly to academic circles, with the most prominent contemporary Reformed advocate for it being Vern Poythress.

Gap Theory. This posits that between Genesis 1:1 and 1:2 there was a spiritual rebellion that devastated creation. The rest of Genesis 1 are real days, but days of God’s reconstitution effort. In this way, it tries to explain the age of the earth and the fossil record, while still holding an understanding of literal days.

Intermittent Days View. This view sees the days as literal days, but with gaps of indefinite (perhaps very long) length between them. This view has been around since the 1970s.

II. How Christians Have Understood the Days Historically

The common assumption is that the church has always held the Calendar Day view, but historically this is more complicated and not as clear cut as one might think. Prominent theologians throughout the history of the church have been cautious in interpreting Genesis chapter 1. Augustine of Hippo recognized the difficulty of interpreting the chapter and warned against being dogmatic in putting forward any one view. Martin Luther, in his 1535 *Lectures on Genesis*, noted that Jewish rabbis historically prohibited anyone under the age of 30 from commenting on Genesis 1 because they assumed one needed a lot more maturity and Scripture reading to be sufficiently competent to exegete the chapter. Even John Calvin, an accomplished exegete in his own right, refrained from putting forth a position on the matter lest he engage in speculation.

Christian theologians throughout church history have not agreed on how to understand the Days of Creation, alternating between literal and non-literal

interpretations. Indeed, as shown by Reformed theologian Robert Letham,² there has been surprisingly more willingness to accept a non-literal understanding of the Days of Creation by some prominent thinkers in Christian history than conventional wisdom assumes. Of the ancient patristic fathers, for example, Origen of Alexandria (AD 185-254), in his works *Contra Celsus* and *De Principiis*, argued against a literal interpretation of the Days of Creation in favor of a “spiritual” (i.e., allegorical) view. Basil the Great (330-379) in *Hexaemeron* argued against an allegorical interpretation of the days in favor of something close to solar days. Ambrose of Milan (339-397) followed suit in his own work of the same name. Augustine of Hippo (354-430) in *The City of God* and *In Genesium ad Litteram* put forth a non-literal view of the Days. He believed God created all things instantaneously, but that the repetition of the days in Genesis is stylistic, intended to show the glory of God in the work of creation.

Augustine’s view was to influence subsequent interpreters, at least in part, such as Bede (673-735), Anselm (1033-1109), and Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274). Robert Grossteste (1168-1253), the Bishop of Lincoln and a leading Christian philosopher in his day, took a non-literal view of the days in his *Hexaemeron*, drawing on Origen’s interpretive method but developing the idea that the days were divided into two divisions, the first three days being “days of ordering” and the second three “days of adornment.” This is an early prototype of sorts to the Framework view that would later be developed by Meredith G. Kline. Aquinas would build on this view as well.

Among the Protestant Reformers, Martin Luther (1483-1546) rejected all non-literal views and asserted a six 24-hour day creation in the form we are familiar with now. Among other reformers, Heinrich Bullinger (1504-1575) did not comment on it at all, and John Calvin (1509-1564) and Peter Martyr Vermigli (1500-1562) both evaded taking a position on the question of the length of the days. Among English reformers, William Perkins (1558-1602), William Ames (1576-1633), and James Ussher (1581-1656) all held that creation took place “in the space of six days” (Perkin’s phrase), without elaborating on how those days were defined. The divines of the Westminster Assembly used similar terminology in the Westminster Standards, although on balance they seemed to have tended toward Six Calendar Day Creation.

III. How Do Genesis and Science Relate?

Since the seventeenth century, theologians have wrestled with how to reconcile the authority of Scripture and that of modern science, since the Calendar Day view suggests a young Earth, perhaps only thousands of years old, whereas many claim science points to an old Earth and an old universe. Following from this, much ink has been expended in recent decades on such things as the reliability of radiocarbon dating, the impact of geological catastrophism, ice layer or dendrochronology, the apprehension of starlight and the expansion of the universe. Interesting as these debates are, they have not—and really, cannot—

² Robert Letham, "In the Space of Six Days": The Days of Creation from Origen to the Westminster Assembly." *Westminster Theological Journal*, 61 (1999) 149-74.

resolve the matter, since the root issue is epistemological, regarding what we can know from science and from testimony. Epistemology is the branch of philosophy concerned with how we know what we know, the limits are to our knowing, the basis for certainty in knowledge, and how we should regard uncertainty.

It has been a conceit of modern philosophy since the Enlightenment to assume that “science” is the *only* reliable way of acquiring knowledge. This is what undergirds the modern debate between “science and religion.” Some, following the lead of the German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), have tried to reconcile the two by saying that science and the Bible speak to different spheres or domains of knowledge, and therefore do not contradict each other at all. In this, science is said to speak to the phenomena of nature, whereas religion and the Bible speak to transcendent values unmeasurable by science. In reality, however, neither side stays neatly inside those boundaries: the Bible makes historical claims about miraculous phenomena happening and many secular scientists use science to make transcendent claims about the nature of all things, including God. So, rather than seeing science and testimony—in this case, Scriptural testimony—as different realms of knowledge, understanding them as different ways of knowing—epistemologies—allows us to better examine the relationship between the two and weigh them more judiciously.

“Science” is an empirical and rational epistemology. In the debate over the Days of Creation there is a tendency on both sides to highlight the credentials of one expert over another, as if the credentials alone provided justification for the claims that were being made. This basically reduces “science” simply to mean little more than something that someone with a scientific background has said. That really is no more than just an appeal to authority. In terms of reliability, such an appeal is only as good as the expertise of the authority being cited and whether that person is even speaking to the subject domain of his or her expertise. For example, an astrophysicist speaking about the meaning of the Hebrew word for “day” is outside his realm of expertise, just as a Hebrew scholar would be commenting on the Big Bang Theory. That is not really what science is.

A more accurate way to think of “science” is as a way of knowing—an epistemology—based on sensory perception and empiricism. The reliability of science, therefore, comes from its methodology, that is, the “scientific method,” and the key to the scientific method is the concept of testability. By “testable” we mean a theory or hypothesis which is (1) observable, (2) measurable, (3) repeatable, and (4) falsifiable. For science to be authoritative, all of these conditions must be present. Repeated testing should be able to establish consistent results, and therefore give certainty to the theory. However, if such a theory cannot be observed, if it is not measurable in any way, and if it is not repeatable then, from a scientific perspective, it is essentially speculation. If a theory is not falsifiable—that is, constructed in such a way that it could be proven false—then one could claim that a theory is true despite the existence of fundamentally contradictory evidence or in the absence of evidence altogether. This happens all too often in our day and age with things like conspiracy theories and political ideologies. The theory ultimately may be true or false, but it has not been nor cannot be empirically—and therefore scientifically—proven.

This epistemological understanding of the nature of science raises an important question when it comes to the origin of all existence, namely, to what degree can science really answer this question authoritatively? Creation from nothing is, by definition, not testable. We cannot create a single test to prove how the existence of all things came about, let alone one that can do that in a way that is repeatable and measurable. All the indicators are, at best, proxy indicators which could support multiple theories, but which at the end of the day cannot prove false the essential Scriptural proposition that God made all things from nothing. For that matter, neither can science prove or rule out any of the competing claims to the biblical understanding, such as the notion that God made things from pre-existing material or that the material order is eternal and therefore not created at all. Origins are fundamentally untestable.

One could criticize this conclusion by arguing that “science” is not purely empirical but draws conclusions from rational deductions extrapolated from empirical research. Such rational deductions would be like mathematics. Thus, it could be argued, one does not need to be able to test the core issue regarding how all things came into existence, but one could extrapolate from what we can test to draw broader conclusions. We must keep in mind, however, that rational deductions are shaped by both the premises one works from, as well as by the accompanying assumptions one has to make in working out the logic of a theory. Presuppositions and assumptions may be logically useful and even necessary, but they are not evidence, and good critical thinking means that they need to be held tentatively. Changed assumptions can lead to changed conclusions. One can see from the history of science that scientific paradigms have changed over the centuries and things that were considered “settled science” have often been turned on their head. That should give us pause in assuming that our current scientific understanding about the origin of all things is definitive. There is a fundamental tentativeness inherent in science which precludes definitive claims and is why many of the debates over scientific issues such things as radiocarbon, ice layer or dendrochronology are inconclusive in resolving the matter.

Scripture is an epistemology based on testimony (as orthodox Christians would understand it, the testimony of God Himself). Testimony is typically what we have to work with in historical and judicial investigation. The primary challenges with regard to testimony are the credibility of the witnesses, the internal coherence and the external corroboration of their accounts. In the matter about the origin of all things, Christian epistemology is based on the testimony of God who was not only present at the creation but brought that creation into existence. The Scriptural account thus depends on whether or not one accepts the biblical picture of God Himself as accurate. If God is fully sovereign, beholden to no one, constrained by nothing, unchangeable in His being, and absolutely truthful and the source of all knowledge, then His testimony is utterly reliable. Hence, the Christian, if he or she is committed to the authority of God, must accept Scripture as the final epistemological authority over science. Logically, one cannot have two epistemological ultimates, since, by definition, if an authority is ultimate then it is the final authority. If the Bible had to meet the bar of science, then science is ultimate, which would contradict the idea of an Almighty God being ultimate.

Reformed Christianity, however, declares Scripture must be the final arbiter of how nature is to be interpreted, not the other way around. This discussion, while on the conceptual side, sets us up to comparatively evaluate the different options put forward regarding the Days of Creation.

IV. How Do We Judge Between the Different Views?

Sorting through the several different views of the Days of Creation can be difficult, so how can we come to a conclusion on this matter? Three things should be considered. First, given the preceding discussion, we should be wary of intermixing science and biblical testimony at the outset. Instead, we should look at the coherence of the biblical testimony in each of these views on their own terms. This is a methodologically cleaner approach, since past efforts to evaluate the different views on the basis of science and Scripture simultaneously had the effect of both confusing the issue and oftentimes elevating science to be determinative of what the right Scriptural interpretation should be. Second, we need to be committed to the understanding that Genesis chs. 1-3 represents real history. This follows logically from the understanding that Scripture is essentially testimony. If we believe Genesis is mythology or fiction, then we are denying the inerrancy of Scripture and the different interpretations of the creation in Genesis account ultimately do not matter. Lastly, we need to look at criteria that cut across the views so that we can evaluate differences between the respective views. All too often, debates over the views become mired in points of evidence that are valid for one view but irrelevant for others. I would suggest three general categories of **clarity and intelligibility**, **cogence in interpretation**, and **corroboration and coherence**, with seven specific criteria under these three categories (summarized in the chart on the next page).

Clarity and Intelligibility

The key thing here is whether the views of the Days of Creation would be understandable to people. God's Word is not obscure; He intends for His Word to be understood by His people throughout the generations. The two criteria suggested here are whether a given view of the Days of Creation reflects a literal approach to the creation narrative and whether there is historical precedent for how it has been understood through time.

Literal approach (Criterion #1). The word "literal" carries with it a lot of modern baggage, such that if something is "literal" it is assumed automatically to be true and if it is non-literal, it is therefore assumed to be fictitious or false. Scripture is richer in a literary sense than what such a simplistic understanding "literalness" would imply. Here, what is meant by "literal" is simply whether the meaning of the text can be discerned from a plain (i.e., *prima facie*) reading of the text. In this case, only the Calendar Day view really qualifies as literal. All other views presume some degree of non-literal interpretation beyond what the plain text of Scripture actually says. In the case of the Calendar Day view, even an atheist doing a plain reading of the text would conclude that the Genesis account refers to six calendar days (although that same person would go on to completely disagree with the truthfulness of the view).

ANALYSIS OF COMPETING VIEWS ON THE DAYS OF CREATION

Evaluative Criteria	Calendar Day	Framework	Day Age	Analogous Days	Intermittent Days	Gap Theory
Clarity and Intelligibility						
1. Literal (i.e., plain reading) approach to the text of Genesis 1:1-2:3?	Y	N	N	N	N	N
2. Existence of historical precedent prior to the nineteenth century	Y	S	N	S	N	N
Cogence in Interpretation						
3. Exegetically derived from Scripture?	Y	Y	N	N	N	N
4. Interpretation DOES NOT require extra-biblical information	Y	Y	N	N	N	N
5. Depends on the definition of the Hebrew term for "day"	Y	N	Y	N	N	N
Corroboration and Coherence						
6. Support in the rest of Scripture to undergird the claims of the view	Y	S	S	N	N	N
7. Safeguards the historicity of the Genesis account	Y	N	N	N	N	N

Y=Yes, N=No, S=Some

Historical Precedence (Criterion #2). Although the existence of a historical precedent for a given view is not in itself determinative of truthfulness, it does get at what would have been plausible to earlier readers of Scripture. The nineteenth century is a useful cutoff, since from the 1800s onward theologians tried to find ways of reconciling Genesis with new scientific discoveries. A view that requires nineteenth or twentieth century understandings of science thus would run contrary to the idea that God intended His Word to be clear to His people throughout the centuries. In light of the historical discussion given earlier, it is clear that the Calendar Day view has been understood throughout history. The Framework view, though somewhat complex, does have some, limited, historical precedent. The Analogous Days view in its current articulation would have been particularly obscure to earlier generations, but historically it would have been in the same vein as an allegorical (or "spiritual") interpretation. The Day Age view would have been understandable to believers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but to hearers much earlier than that it would have begged the question as to why God took so long to make creation, rather than creating instantaneously or in a short span of time. A similar case could be made for the Intermittent Days view, as earlier interpreters would not have seen the need for positing long periods between the days. As for the Gap view, it requires logical leaps not self-evident from the text, and for that reason probably would have been off-putting to the early Church Fathers, given resemblances to heretical Gnostic writings of the

second and third centuries AD, especially with regard to reading into the text things that were not there. The Day Age, Intermittent Days, and Gap view all try to reconcile the Genesis account with an “Old Earth” chronology that simply would not have been of much interest to generations before the nineteenth century. For that reason, there is no real historical precedence for those views.

Cogence in Interpretation

This includes how much the view is **exegetically derived from Scripture** (Criterion #3) and whether it requires **extra-biblical assumptions** (Criterion #4). Although all the views of the Days of Creation to some extent rely on Scriptural support, the extent and cogence of the exegesis undergirding each view is important in assessing the biblical strength of the view. Separate but alongside this, there is the degree to which a view depends on assumptions outside of Scripture. A strong view of the Days of Creation would be one with more exegetical support and which does not rely on external assumptions to sustain it. Only the Calendar Day and Framework views are derived primarily from an exegesis of the text of Genesis chs. 1 & 2 and do not require some kind of extra-biblical information. Of the different views, the Analogous Days, Intermittent Days, and Gap views have the weakest exegetical support, and all are dependent on extra-biblical assumptions. The Analogous Days view requires academic theory. The other views postulate logical assumptions rather than actual exegesis and depend more on their plausibility than on Scripture.

In the context of exegesis, a word needs to be said at this point about the **definition of the Hebrew word for day, “yom”** (Criterion #5). Some theologians try to draw considerable significance in how “yom” is understood. Calendar Day proponents highlight that “yom” is most commonly understood as a calendar day in Scripture. “Yom” does mean this, but it can also mean day in the sense of “daytime” or day as in a major event, as in “Day of the LORD.” Day Age proponents refer to 2 Peter 3:8 to argue that *“one day is with the Lord as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day.”* Although this is true, while “yom” can mean a much longer period of time than a calendar day, it does not have to mean that. “Yom,” in fact, has a similar semantic range in Hebrew as “day” does in English. What is more important for exegeting the Days of Creation is the fact that “yom” is paired with ordinal numbers and accompanied by the “evening and morning” repetition. It is these facts that strengthen the argument in favor of the Days being Calendar Days and against the Day Age view of them being long periods of time.

Corroboration and Coherence

Under this category there is the criterion of **support in the rest of Scripture beyond Genesis 1 and 2** (Criterion #6). The Calendar Day view is essentially the default because it assumes the days are literal. The question here is whether there are indications elsewhere in Scripture to suggest that Genesis 1 should be interpreted in a non-literal manner. That is, did biblical writers after Moses in the Old or New Testament periods treat the creation account in non-literal ways so as to suggest that other than a literal interpretation was meant by Genesis 1 and 2?

The short answer is no. The Framework Hypothesis relies on a close interpretation of Gen. 2 to underpin its claims about Gen. 1, and the Day Age view draws on the principle outlined in 2 Pet. 3:8 addressed above, but neither view draws on other passages outside of these. The other views on the Days of Creation do not have any corroboration in the rest of Scripture. Subsequent Scripture texts regarding the creation (e.g., Psalms 33 and 136) assume the fact that God made the heavens and the earth but do not shed additional light on the Days of Creation per se. Both Paul (in Rom. 5:14, 1 Cor. 15:22 and 45, 1 Tim. 2:13, 14) and Christ Jesus (in Matt. 19:1-6), in how they discuss Adam, assume he was a real historical person who was the progenitor of the human race. Thus, although they do not speak directly to the length of the Days of Creation, they do assume the literalness of the Genesis 1-2 account and its historical veracity.

Finally, let us turn to the **implications** of these views in terms of their impact on the historicity of Genesis account and their interaction with scientific views (Criteria #7). The important thing to note here is that all the non-literal views except the Day Age view can harmonize with a wide range of scientific theories, mostly because they avoid making any claims that would lend themselves to scientific study. The Calendar Day and Day Age views are the only ones that make phenomenological claims. This same fact also affects the historicity of the Genesis account. The non-literal views could accommodate an historical reading of the Days of Creation—or, conversely, they would still be true even if the Genesis account were considered completely mythological. This undercuts their ability to uphold the historicity of Genesis. The Calendar Day view upholds the historicity of Genesis because it is making a more definitive phenomenological claim. If one accepts that claim as true, then the historical nature of Genesis follows logically. The Day Age view attains to an Old Earth chronology but achieves this at the expense of forcing an implausibility regarding plants (Day 3) existing for a geological age prior to sunlight (Day 4). This contradiction undercuts the viability of the view, and with it, its support to the historicity of Genesis.

CONCLUSION

Based on this overarching evaluation, the Calendar Day view is probably the strongest in terms of being derived from and consistent with the rest of Scripture, as well as in its intelligibility. Of the non-literal views, the Framework Hypothesis is probably the strongest, given some of the problems with the Day Age view. The other three non-literal views are too speculative and unsupported by Scripture. Eliminating those views from consideration simplifies what we need to consider. The key difference between the Calendar Day and Framework views is not that one is literal and the other allegorical or figurative. It is that the Calendar Day view is methodological and chronological in its focus (i.e., “It happened this way over this period of time”), whereas the Framework view is theological and topical (i.e., “God did these things”). Of these two, the Calendar Day view more clearly upholds the historicity of the Genesis account, whereas the Framework Hypothesis is equivocal on this score.

In the final analysis, we need to approach Genesis chs. 1 and 2 with a certain degree of humility, and indeed, of faith. There are good reasons why there has not been unanimity of opinion on these chapters throughout the history of the church. Of the views, the Calendar Day view and the Framework view are the most exegetically grounded. Both require some kind of caveat to be accepted, either with regard to the relationship to science or history. The Calendar Day view needs to have the caveat that physical phenomena did not necessarily act in the same way during the initial creation period as they do now. This caveat is necessary because various scientific views assume the uniformity of physical and chemical processes when creation came about as exist today. The Framework Hypothesis needs to have the caveat that Genesis chs. 1 and 2 are an account of true history, even if they are not presented in a linear fashion. This is necessary because the view shades over into treating the text of Genesis 1 and 2 as merely literary, and thus can reduce Scripture to being essentially mythological. In conclusion, while the scientific issues that people wrestle over are not unimportant, they are essentially side issues. Fundamentally, the issue of the origin of all things is a question of metaphysics, not physics and it can only really be answered with metaphysical answers, not physical ones.