

The Days of Genesis: An Old-Earth View

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(Written in dialogue with Dr. John MacArthur, who takes the young-earth view)
Areopagus Journal 5/2 (March-April 2005): 15, 17, 19.
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God's kingdom and our Christian witness to the world are far weightier and grander matters than how long it took for God to create. *That* God created is more critical than the *duration* of creation. Alas, the young-earth *versus* old-earth debate has often been ugly and mean-spirited, and I (an old-earthier) hope to build—not burn—bridges of understanding, and I readily affirm the Christian commitment of young-earthers.

First, I'll set forth important hermeneutical perspectives. Second, I'll point out some scientific evidences for an ancient universe. Third, I'll make the case that faithfully interpreting Genesis 1-2 with a high view of Scripture doesn't require taking "day" as a 24-hour period. Genesis 1-2 allows for greater flexibility of interpretation than what some young-earthers claim. This flexibility can easily accommodate the weighty evidence for the universe's antiquity.

Hermeneutics and Authority

For much of my life, I'd believed in a recent universe, being suspicious of any "billions of years" talk. But after reading scientifically-trained authors—Christian and non-Christian with no apparent axe to grind—who repeatedly spoke of an ancient cosmos, I investigated further. To my surprise, not only did many young-earth "evidences" in which I had taken scientific refuge come crashing down, I found that most such "evidences" were highly selective, skewed, outdated, or otherwise problematic. I would have been happy to find solid support for a young universe (and I'm still open to persuasion), but I regularly found it to be shaky at best. The more I have studied the Scriptures and the relevant, wide-ranging scientific data, the more reasonably I can conclude that (1) the universe is billions of years old and (2) Scripture accords nicely with this evidence. The breath-taking splendor of God's creation isn't diminished if the process took billions of years rather than six 24-hour days. The heavens still declare God's glory.

I am firmly committed to Scripture's authority, but the difference between John MacArthur and me is hermeneutical. One must distinguish between Scripture's *authority* and *our interpretations* of Scripture. As Francis Schaeffer (incidentally an old-earthier) wrote, "We must not claim, on the one hand, that science is unnecessary or meaningless, nor on the other hand, that the extensions [i.e., interpretations] we make from Scripture are absolutely accurate or that these extensions have the same validity as the statements of Scripture itself."ⁱ John Calvin astutely observed that students of Scripture can make the Bible appear silly to the scientifically-minded by insisting on pressing certain aspects of biblical language as literal. For example, Genesis 1:16's *observational* language refers to the sun and the moon as "the two great lights." Some of Calvin's contemporaries had interpreted this to mean that the moon must be bigger than Saturn, which is false. However, Calvin asserts that Moses simply addresses the common man—without need for scientific exactness (as with our use of "sunrise" and "sunset").ⁱⁱ

The two "books" of God's self-revelation—His *Word* and His *world*—aren't ultimately contradictory. On the one hand, Scripture should not be held hostage to certain scientists' pontifications (e.g., Christians across the centuries have held to creation out of nothing even when the empirical

evidence wasn't as clear as it is today).ⁱⁱⁱ On the other, scientific discoveries have at times demanded that humans adjust their *interpretations* of Scripture (regarding the earth's immovability, its being on foundations, its spatial centrality in the cosmos, etc.). Theologians and scientists can learn from each other.

Clearly, Genesis 1-3 *is* historical (e.g., Adam and Eve as the first couple who were tempted and sinned: Lk. 3:38; Ac. 17:26; Rom. 5:12-19; 1Tim. 2:13-14; 1 Cor. 11:8-9; 15:21-2; 2 Cor. 11:3); however, it has a number of non-literal/metaphorical elements as well (some evangelical exegetes consider the early chapters of Genesis "poetical-historical"). Thus we must not over-literalize Genesis 1-3 given important theological/literary motifs: God's "dividing," which foreshadows priestly responsibilities in the tabernacle (Lev. 10:10; 11:46), metaphor (God "breathed" and "walked"), poetic parallelism (1:27; 2:2), poetically arranged strophes with "echo" and "re-echo" ("God said"/"and there was"), etc.

Unfortunately, many young-earthers have accused old-earthers of not taking the biblical text "literally" (an often ill-defined, inconsistently-used term that fails to take genres and important literary features into consideration)—*or* of compromising with naturalistic evolutionists. But many careful evangelical exegetes such as Gleason Archer, Craig Blomberg, Walter Kaiser, Craig Keener, Derek Kidner, Kenneth Mathews, Vern Poythress, Bruce Waltke (to name a few) have observed from the text itself that the word "day [*yôm*]" in Genesis 1-2 hardly entails a 24-hour time-period; the text is more generous than this.

Furthermore, another view to consider is the "literary framework" view, in which the author isn't interested in a specific chronological or scientific account, but speaks *literarily/theologically*, underscoring the *fact* of God's creation.^{iv} First, God *forms* (days 1-3—light separating from darkness; water above and below separated; earth's vegetation) and then *fills* His creation (days 4-6: lights in the heavens, birds/fish, and animals/humans). At any rate, the biblical text does allow for greater flexibility regarding the "days" of Genesis. But before any such analysis, what is the scientific support for an old universe?

The Antiquity of Universe

I won't expand much upon the evidences for an ancient earth/universe, which are abundant.^v I shall basically list them. There is (1) the *rate of the universe's expansion* (red-shifting of spectral light from stars) as well as (2) *the rate of cooling from initially high temperatures*, which support an ancient universe. In addition, consider (3) the *rate of stellar burning* and (4) the *arrival of light from distant galaxies*.^{vi} There is (5) the phenomenon of *varves* (two-toned sediment layers reflecting annual change of seasons); these layers number in the millions—and thus millions of years. Note (6) *the lengthy process of continental shifting* (plate tectonics), in which land masses move slowly—about 2-5 centimeters per year. (There is an almost perfect jigsaw-puzzle fit between the eastern coast of North America and the northwestern coast of Africa as well as eastern South America with Western Africa; other land masses also fit together well.) This process—which includes the formation of mountains (e.g., the Himalayas) that were once on the ocean floor embedded with layers of marine fossils—takes many million years. (7) Coral reefs grow only a few centimeters per year in the best of conditions—again, a process that would take millions of years to produce today's reefs. There have been (8) at least *four major ice ages*, often with intervening subtropical conditions—a process taking millions of years; this can be accounted for by the earth's tilt that varies by a few degrees approximately every 41,000 years (and sometimes in combination with the earth's changing from an elliptical orbit to a more circular one every 100,000 years or so).

(9) Detecting *radioactive decay* through various corroborating or cross-checking methods supports an ancient earth, not a young one. (10) The *fossil record* indicates that animal death occurred before human beings existed; with the fall, *human* death entered into the world. (Contrary to what young-earthers claim, Rom. 5:12 simply *doesn't* assert that *all* death [e.g., plant death] came into the world with Adam's sin.) What's more, Scripture indicates that the food chain was *created by God*—something young-earthers don't adequately address. God's original creation includes carnivores (Job 38:39-41; 39:28-9; 41:1,10,14; Ps. 104:21,29). There's both *beauty*—as well as *bloodiness*—in the world God made.^{vii}

The Days of Genesis 1-2

Before arguing for a greater flexibility of interpretation regarding the word “day” in Genesis 1-2, I point out that *even if* one takes Genesis 1's days as 24-hour periods, one can *still* believe in an ancient universe, including ice ages, animal death, and dinosaur extinction (e.g., Old Testament scholar John Sailhamer holds just such a view—“textual creationism”).^{viii}

As for the meaning of “day” in Gen. 1, Beeson Divinity School's Kenneth Mathews correctly observes: “there are many indications that ‘day’ in its customary sense may not be intended.”^{ix} Here are some: (1) Those who take a young-earth view typically claim that the ordinal (e.g., second, third) with *yôm* (day) is *always* a literal 24-hour day. But this *isn't* so. Take the restoration passage of Hosea 6:2: “[The LORD] will raise us up on the *third day*”—a phrase identical to Gen 1:13; this case presents a clear exception. Interestingly, Luke 13:32 reads,^x “Go and tell [Herod], ‘Behold, I [Jesus] cast out demons and perform cures *today and tomorrow*, and the *third [day]* I reach my goal.” Clearly something other than a 24-hour day is in mind here (see also Ps. 90:4, where human life is like a “day [*yôm*]”; 2 Pet. 3:8). (2) The phrase “day one [*yôm echad*]” in Gen. 1:5 is also found in Zech. 14:7, referring to “the day of the LORD”—clearly not a 24-hour day. (3) Genesis 2:4 reads “in the *day* [*yôm*] the LORD God made earth and heaven”—referring to the *entire* act of creation. So within the text of Genesis 1-2 itself, we have clear indication that “day” can mean more than 24 hours. (4) “Evening” is mentioned *before* “morning” throughout Gen. 1; this is an unusual rendering and suggests a sacramental and symbolic usage that points forward to Israel's celebration of holy “days and months and years” (Gen. 1:14; Sabbath and Passover began the *evening* before). (5) If the sun was not made until the *fourth* day, as young-earthers claim, then why think that the preceding days were 24-hours in length? (6) “Evening”/“morning” isn't mentioned on the seventh day, suggesting God's complete rest from this initial creation is *still* continuing to this day (cp. Heb. 4:4: “God rested on the seventh day from all His works”)—a very long “day” of rest! If this final day can be more flexibly understood, then why can't the others? (7) Some say that Exodus 20:9-11 (“in six days the LORD made heaven and earth . . . and rested the seventh day”) demonstrates a literal 24-hour view of “day” in Gen. 1. However, the focus is on a divine pattern being set for humans to follow, but this doesn't mean that *all* comparisons are equal. Consider 1 Jn. 3:16: Christ's (unique atoning) laying-down-of-life sets a pattern for our (repeated, non-atoning) laying-down-of life for our brethren. Also, note that the fourth commandment is repeated in Ex. 31:12-17, which adds that God “was refreshed”—which *isn't* to be taken literally (cp. Isa. 40:28). Why insist that “day” be taken as such? (8) The third day calls for a lengthy process of plants to grow, produce seeds, and yield fruit (Gen. 1:11-12); a 24-hour interpretation would require extremely rapid plant development, as in time-lapse photography in which a seed grows to full flower in seconds! (9) The sixth day also requires more than 24-hours: Adam names thousands of animals, gets acquainted with their mating habits, realizes he's alone, etc., suggesting more than just 24 hours. And Adam's cry at Eve's arrival suggests significant passage of time—“*At last! [happa`am]*” (2:23). Note the same phrase used at Leah's

“vindication” in childbearing “at last” (29:34-5); Jacob’s *finally* leaving Laban after fourteen years (30:20); Jacob’s *finally* departing this life having seen Joseph (46:30). (10) If Gen. 1-2 is a historico-poetic genre, then it is unfair to make unwarranted literary demands upon it (such as the ordinal + *yôm* configuration = 24 hours). Think of how wrong-headed it would be to insist that Revelation’s numbers be literalized for similar reasons, when this genre (apocalyptic-prophetic) is highly symbolic.

For these and other reasons, a high view of Scripture does not require holding to 24-hour days in Gen. 1; there is greater flexibility, which leaves wide open the possibility of an old-earth view. Furthermore, *other* plausible approaches—such as Sailhamer’s “textual creationism” (“day” as 24 hours) or the literary framework hypothesis—allow for an ancient universe as well.

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ⁱ *Genesis in Space and Time* (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 1972), 36.

ⁱⁱ John Calvin, *Genesis*, repr., trans. John King (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 86-87.

ⁱⁱⁱ Paul Copan and William Lane Craig, *Creation Out of Nothing: A Biblical, Philosophical, and Scientific Exploration* (Grand Rapids/Leicester: Apollos, 2004).

^{iv} This is briefly described in Greg Boyd and Paul Eddy, *Across the Spectrum* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 67-73.

^v I draw upon various astronomers, astrophysicists, geologists, etc. such as J. Gribbin, *In the Beginning* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1993); John D. Barrow and Joseph Silk, *The Left Hand of Creation* (New York: Oxford, 1993, 2nd ed.); Davis A. Young, *Christianity and the Age of the Earth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982; repr. Artisan Pub.)—to name a few.

^{vi} Light from distant stars becomes visible to humans (Tycho Brahe’s 1572 starburst; Ian Shelton’s [Feb. 1987] observing a supernova 160-170,000 light years away), which goes against “appearance of age” idea.

^{vii} Creation’s goodness doesn’t imply *perfection* or *completion*. On animal death, see Paul Copan, *That’s Just Your Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), chaps. 16-17 and *How Do You Know You’re Not Wrong?* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), chap. 9.

^{viii} *Genesis Unbound* (Sisters, Ore.: Multnomah, 1996).

^{ix} *Genesis 1-11:26 NAC* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1996), 149.

^x Though the Gospels were written in Greek, Jesus’ originally spoke in Aramaic.