

SEVEN DAYS
THAT DIVIDE THE
WORLD

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THE BEGINNING ACCORDING TO
GENESIS AND SCIENCE

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14. Of course there will often be difference of opinion as to what is central and what is peripheral.
15. From a mathematical point of view there are some chaotic elements in the dynamics of the planets. We cannot predict accurately where they will be situated in 100 million years' time, because we cannot measure them accurately enough now. However, these chaotic elements appear to be bounded.
16. John Hedley Brooke, *Science and Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 96.
17. A star that passes directly overhead in London. Bradley detected an annual variation in the apparent position of stars that was due to changes in the earth's velocity. Such calculations lead to an estimate for earth's orbital velocity of 30 km/sec.
18. A paradigm is a big picture or framework within which science is done.

BUT IS IT OLD? THE DAYS OF CREATION

INTERPRETATION OF THE GENESIS DAYS: A BRIEF HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

We all know what the controversy is. Christians are divided into two main groups in their understanding of the Genesis days. First, there are those who believe that the days of Genesis are the twenty-four-hour days of one earth week, and that the universe is young (created around six thousand years ago). Then there are those who believe that the universe is ancient. It is important to take on board right away that both the young-earth and the ancient-earth creationist views go back a long way. Neither of them is a recent invention.

The word *creationist*, however, has changed its meaning over time. Originally it meant simply someone who believed

in a creator, without any implication for how or when the creating was done; nowadays, *creationist* is usually taken to mean “young-earth creationist.”

Through the ages many have held that straight lines can be drawn from the creation week of Genesis to the week of ordinary life. The Jewish calendar, for instance, has for centuries taken as its starting point the “Era of Creation,” which it dates to 3761 BC (2010 is the Jewish year 5770—which runs from September 2009 to September 2010). Furthermore, in contemporary Hebrew, the days of the week are denoted by the numbers 1–6, with the seventh day Shabbat (Sabbath, rest), exactly as in Genesis 1.

The Christian reformers Luther and Calvin¹ and many of those who drew up the Westminster Confession also held the twenty-four-hour view. In his commentary on Genesis, Calvin said that the duration of creation was “the space of six days,” a phrase later adopted into the Westminster Confession.

However, there have been others, even in ancient times, who interpreted Genesis 1 differently. Among them was Philo (10 BC–AD 50), an influential Jewish writer who lived in Alexandria at the time of Christ. Among many other works, he wrote a book entitled *A Treatise on the Account of the Creation of the World as Given by Moses*. In section III.13 he says that “the world was made in six days, not because the Creator stood in need of a length of time (for it is natural that God should do everything at once, not merely by uttering a command, but by even thinking of it); but because the things created required arrangement; and number is akin to arrangement; and, of all numbers, six is, by the laws of

nature, the most productive: for of all the numbers, from the unit upwards, it is the first perfect one, being made equal to its parts, and being made complete by them; the number three being half of it, and the number two a third of it, and the unit a sixth of it . . .” Thus Philo thought creation was the act of a moment, and the Genesis record had more to do with principles of order and arrangement.

Some of the early church fathers, such as Justin Martyr, in his *Dialogue with Trypho*, and Irenaeus, in *Against Heresies*, suggested that the days might have been long epochs, on the basis of Psalm 90:4 (“For a thousand years in your sight are but as yesterday when it is past, or as a watch in the night”) and 2 Peter 3:8 (“With the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day”). Irenaeus applied this reading of Genesis to the warning God gave regarding the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil (“In the day that you eat of it you shall surely die” [Gen. 2:17]): “On one and the same day on which they ate, they also died (for it is one day of creation) . . . He (Adam) did not overstep the thousand years, but died within their limit.”²

Clement of Alexandria (AD 150–215), writing, like Justin and Irenaeus, in the second century, thought that creation could not take place in time at all, since “time was born along with things which exist.”³ He therefore understood the days to communicate the priority of created things but not the timing of their creation. A little later, Origen (AD 185–254), the most prominent theologian of his time, pointed out that in the Genesis account the sun was not made until the fourth day. He made the obvious objection: “Now what man of intelligence will believe that the first,

the second and the third day, and the evening and morning existed without the sun, moon and stars?"⁴ We shall consider his objection in the next chapter.

In the fourth century, Augustine, who wrote much about Genesis, openly stated in his book *The City of God* that he found the days of Genesis 1 difficult: "As for these days, it is difficult, perhaps impossible to think, let alone explain in words, what they mean."⁵ In his famous commentary *On the Literal Meaning of Genesis*, he added: "But at least we know that it [the Genesis day] is different from the ordinary day with which we are familiar." In fact Augustine (like Philo above) held that God had created everything in a moment, and that the days represented a logical sequence to explain it to us.

These men were not armchair theorists. Some of them were tortured or martyred for their faith: among them Justin Martyr (as his name implies), Irenaeus, and Origen. Nor, obviously, were they influenced by contemporary science, such as geology and evolutionary biology.

We have only given some examples in this very brief survey; hence it is important to add that the understanding of the days of Genesis as twenty-four-hour days seems to have been the dominant view for many centuries.

One of the major tensions in the discussion of the early chapters of Genesis is between those who think that the author intended the book to be read as history and those who regard the author's intention as the conveying of timeless truths through figurative, theological language.

I say "the early chapters," since the impression given by the rest of the book of Genesis is that of a historical narrative

which describes the rise of the Hebrew nation from among the Gentile nations of the ancient Near East, and follows their chronological development through the family histories of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. It is not surprising, then, that many argue the same for the early chapters of Genesis, which clearly form an integral part of the book. Surely those chapters also give a strong impression that they are talking about actual events, places, and people, in giving a historical narrative from the creation of the world and the first humans, to the development and spread of civilization, down to the time of the great flood through which Noah and his family were preserved to become the progenitors of the nations of the ancient Near East? It seems to me that there could be a real danger in some quarters of separating theology from history.⁶

Genesis is, of course, a text that comes to us from a time and culture very different from our own. It is from the ancient Near East, so we cannot simply read it as if it were a contemporary Western document written to address contemporary Western concerns.⁷

That raises the question: just how much is Genesis influenced by the culture in which it was written, and in what sense?⁸ This is a question that can be addressed to any part of the Bible, of course. Those who, like the present author, are convinced that Scripture is God's revelation are also aware that God used human authors who wrote in terms of their own culture and surroundings as they conveyed God's Word to the world. Jesus told parables about farming, building, and fishing, not about factories, aviation, and jungle exploration. And yet his parables are accessible to anyone in

revelation, including Genesis? The absolute nature of the second sentence (“no passage”) seems to contradict Walton’s own view (pointed out above) that, although there are correspondences between the Genesis cosmology and that of the surrounding nations, there are considerable differences.³⁰

Walton also thinks that “we gain nothing by bringing God’s revelation into accord with today’s science.” I disagree. I am not, of course, claiming that the Bible can inform every branch of science, but I am claiming that there are certain fundamental points of convergence of such immense significance for our understanding of the universe and ourselves that it is worth pointing them out. Such convergences between the Bible and contemporary science add to the Bible’s credibility in a sceptical world—as Scripture itself would warrant us in thinking (Rom. 1:19–20).

THE GENESIS ENIGMA

Indeed, it is interesting to see that the correspondence between the sequence given in Genesis and that given by science has been pointed out even by people who set little store on the factual accuracy of the biblical record in passages of this kind. As an example from an earlier era, English philosopher and historian Edwyn Bevan (1870–1943), in an essay titled *The Religious Value of Myths in the Old Testament*, writes,

The stages by which the earth comes to be what it is cannot indeed be precisely fitted into the account which modern science would give of the process, but in principle they seem to anticipate the modern scientific account by a remarkable flash of inspiration, which a Christian may also call

inspiration. Supposing we could be transported backward in time to different moments in the past of our planet, we should see it first in a condition in which there was no land distinguishable from water and only a dim light coming from the invisible sun through the thick volumes of enveloping cloud: at a later moment, as the globe dried, land would have appeared; again at a later moment low forms of life, animal and vegetable, would have begun; sooner or later in the process the cloud-masses would have become so thin and broken that a creature standing on earth would see above him sun and moon and stars; at a still later moment we should see on the earth great primeval monsters; and lastly we should see the earth with its present fauna and flora, and the final product of animal evolution, Man.³¹

Much more recently, Andrew Parker, Research Director at the Natural History Museum in London, draws attention to the same phenomenon in a way that is directly relevant to Walton’s view. Parker, an evolutionary biologist who does not profess to believe in God, was stimulated to look at Genesis 1 after a number of people had written to him suggesting that his research on the origin of the eye seemed to echo the statement “Let there be light.” He was very surprised at what he found: “Without expecting to find anything, I discovered a whole series of parallels between the creation story on the Bible’s first page and the modern, scientific account of life’s history. This at least made me think. The congruence was almost exact . . .” He later adds, “The more detail is examined, the more convincing and remarkable I believe the parallels become. One question I will be asking in this book is this: could it be that the creation account on page one of Genesis was written as it is because that is how the sequence of events really happened?”³² Here is Parker’s conclusion:

Here, then, is the Genesis Enigma: The opening page of Genesis is scientifically accurate but was written long before the science was known. How did the writer of this page come to write this creation account? . . . I must admit, rather nervously as a scientist averse to entertaining such an idea, that the evidence that the writer of the opening page of the Bible was divinely inspired is strong. I have never before encountered such powerful impartial evidence that the Bible is the product of divine inspiration.³³

It is not surprising that Parker's ideas are hotly contested, particularly by atheists; but his book gives scientific support to the order of events as recorded in Genesis from someone who has no obvious axe to grind.

A PARALLEL BETWEEN COSMOLOGY AND PHYSIOLOGY?

Finally, I wish to comment further on the way in which Walton supports his view, cited above, that "the Israelites received no revelation to update or modify their 'scientific' understanding of the cosmos." He draws a parallel between cosmology and physiology, as follows:

If cosmic geography is culturally descriptive rather than revealed truth, it takes its place among many other biblical examples of culturally relative notions. For example, in the ancient world people believed that the seat of intelligence, emotion and personhood was in the internal organs, particularly the heart, but also the liver, kidneys and intestines. Many Bible translations use the English word "mind" when the Hebrew text refers to the entrails, showing the ways in which language and culture are interrelated. In modern language we still refer to the heart metaphorically as the seat of emotion. In the ancient world this was not metaphor, but

physiology. Yet we must notice that when God wanted to talk to the Israelites about their intellect, emotions and will, he did not revise their ideas of physiology and feel compelled to reveal the function of the brain. Instead, he adopted the language of the culture to communicate in terms they understood.³⁴

One can agree with Walton that language and culture are related, but it is the nature of that relationship which is the issue. I have already given reasons why I think that Genesis 1 is a revelation of God regarding aspects of cosmology and is not "culturally descriptive," even though it is written in language that the readers can understand and not (for very obvious reasons) in technical scientific language.

Walton claims that the biblical references to internal organs bolster his "cultural relativity" argument. He mentions several internal organs associated with intellect, emotions, and will but, interestingly, omits to mention the head in connection with dreams and thoughts (Dan. 7:1, 15).³⁵ He recognizes the contemporary metaphorical use of heart but claims, without giving any evidence, that in the Bible it was not metaphor but physiology. This seems very simplistic. For instance, Genesis 6:6 states, "And the LORD was sorry that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart." I find it hard to believe that the Hebrews thought that this was a physiological statement about God. Or again, Jeremiah 23:9 says, "My heart is broken within me." Interpreted as a physiological statement, this would have to mean the physical heart pump had ceased to function.

In the ancient world, they were surely as familiar with the use of metaphor as we are. Moreover, then as now, that use was quite sophisticated. Walton mentions entrails, used