



# **In Six Days**

## **The Genesis Creation Debate**

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# 1 Introduction

The beginning chapters of Genesis in the Bible have been a source of controversy both within and outside the Christian church. The creation account is obviously in conflict with the view held by many in our society who believe that everything in the physical universe can be explained by undirected natural causes. However, the creation account has also generated considerable controversy within the church. The controversy here centers primarily on the timing of the creation events and whether the account should be interpreted literally or as a literary form. In this paper I will try to summarize the major interpretations of the creation days in Genesis 1 and to point out areas of disagreement. I am not writing as an advocate of any of these positions. There are intelligent and committed Christians advocating each of these positions and each one is deserving of our consideration.

I have been professionally involved in science as a mathematician for more than 40 years. I am also a Christian who believes that the Bible is the inspired word of God. It is my belief that it is profitable to debate the theological and scientific issues involved in the Genesis creation account as long as we do so with respect for other Christians holding differing views. This has not always been the case. My hope is that we may come to see that other Christians can have a different viewpoint on the time-scale of creation and still hold to the infallibility and inerrancy of the Bible as God's word.

To set the stage for what follows I would like to make a couple of general observations. (1) I think we can all agree that the creation account given in Genesis is not an eye-witness account. There was no one present except God when these events took place. This leaves open the possibility (not necessity) of a non-literal interpretation of the creation account. (2) The Genesis creation account was not written exclusively for our generation. It was meant to be read and enjoyed by people of every age. Therefore the language employed is not scientific or technical in nature. We have to be careful not to read more into these passages than is really there.

I begin these notes by presenting some historical background information. Next I discuss some of the language and scientific difficulties involved in interpreting the Genesis creation account. Following this I outline the major viewpoints on the creation days along with some of the major arguments for and against each one. I conclude with a statement of some truths about creation that hopefully all sides of the controversy can agree on. There are a number of good references containing much more extensive presentations than are given here. The ones I have found to be most useful are listed in the reference section.

## 2 Historical Background

Much of the controversy concerning the creation account in Genesis centers on the meaning of the word "day". Some consider it to be a normal 24-hour day, others say it refers to a period of time of unspecified length, and still others treat it as part of a literary form. This controversy at times has become very bitter. There didn't appear to be this divisiveness in the early history of

the church. For the first 1600 years of the Christian church there seemed to be a tolerant attitude toward differing views on the meaning of the creation days. Probably most adhered to the 24-hour day viewpoint, but there were a number of exceptions. Here are some quotes by two early church theologians

*As for these days, it is difficult, perhaps impossible to think — let alone explain in words — what they mean.* Augustine (354–430 A.D.)

*the ‘days’ of Moses’ account ... are not to be equated with the days in which we live.* Anselm (1033–1109 A.D.)

Augustine seems to have believed that creation was instantaneous and that the days should not be interpreted literally. It should also be pointed out that most of the early church Fathers based their interpretation of the days in Genesis 1 on Greek or Latin translations and not on the original Hebrew.

The major church creeds took no definite position on the length of the creation days [4]. This would seem to indicate that the timing of the creation events was not considered to be of primary importance.

The Apostles Creed simply states

*I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth.*

The Nicene Creed (381 A.D.) limits its statement on creation to this

*We believe in one God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible.*

The Heidelberg Catechism (1563) states the following

*God created them [man and woman] good and in his own image, that is, in true righteousness and holiness, so that they might truly know God their creator; love him with all their heart, and live with him in eternal happiness for his praise and glory The eternal Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who out of nothing created heaven and earth and everything in them, who still upholds and rules them by his eternal counsel and providence ...*

*All creatures are so completely in his [God’s] hand that without his will they can neither move nor be moved.*

The Belgic Confession (1566) has this to say about creation

*We believe that the Father created heaven and earth and all other creatures from nothing, when it seemed good to him, by his Word — that is to say his Son. He has given all creatures their being, form, and appearance, and their various functions for serving their Creator. . . . He also created the angels good, that they might be his messengers and serve his elect.*

*We know him [God] by two means: First, by the creation, preservation, and government of the universe, since the universe is before our eyes like a beautiful book in which all creatures, great and small, are as letters to make us ponder the invisible things of God: his eternal power and his divinity, as the apostle Paul says in Romans 1:20. All these things are enough to convict men and to leave them without excuse. Second, he makes himself known to us more openly by his holy and divine Word.*

The Westminster Confession (1646) makes the following statement

*It pleased God the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, for the manifestation of the glory of his eternal power, wisdom, and goodness, in the beginning to create, or make of nothing, the world, and all things therein whether visible or invisible, in the space of six days, and all very good.*

Only the Westminster confession even mentions a time period for creation, and it merely repeats, without explanation, what is recorded in Genesis. It is known that many of the Westminster divines supported the calendar-day interpretation, but there is considerable disagreement on whether they were applying that restriction here. Calvin used the same term “in the space of six days” to counter Augustine’s instantaneous creation idea, but did not elaborate on the meaning of “days”.

The seeds of controversy were planted in the mid-17th century by two British scholars, John Lightfoot and James Ussher. In 1642, just 31 years after the completion of the King James translation, Cambridge University Vice-Chancellor John Lightfoot published his voluminous calculation of the exact date for the creation of the universe: September 17, 3928 B.C. Eight years later, James Ussher, Anglican archbishop of Ireland, corrected Lightfoot’s date. His copious commentary and calculations changed it to October 3, 4004 B.C. Not to be outdone, Lightfoot adjusted Ussher’s date to the week of October 18–24, 4004 B.C. with the creation of Adam occurring on October 23 at 9:00 A.M., 45th meridian time. From the 18th century onward, the King James Version incorporated Ussher’s chronology as margin notes or even as headings of its various editions.

In the 1800s, scientists Charles Lyell, John Phillips, Lord Kelvin, and John Joly each independently (using sedimentation rates, earth’s cooling rate, and the rate of salt accumulation in the oceans) came to believe that the earth’s age must be at least in the tens of millions of years. The rise of Darwinism in the late 1800s caused many to question the 24-hour day interpretation since Darwinian evolution involves a gradual transformation of lower forms of life into higher forms over a very long time period. Most scientists today believe that the earth is very old. Current estimates for the age of the earth are about 4.5 billion years. Although there are some questions relating to the methods for estimating the age of the earth, these estimates are generally accepted.

One attempt to accommodate a long time period for creation is the so-called ‘gap theory’ [6]. This interpretation is based on an alternate rendition of the phrase “the earth was without form” in verse 1 of Genesis. Another possible translation is “the earth became formless”. The gap theorists claim that there was an earlier civilization, ruled over by Satan, which was destroyed by God. This destruction caused the earth to become empty. The remaining verses of Genesis describe a re-creation by God. There is an unspecified time gap between the two creations. This interpretation was popular in the 1800s and early 1900s. It was contained in the notes of the popular Scofield Reference Bible. In this form it has very few adherents at present. However, there are some today who do believe that there may be time gaps both before and between the creation days.

The growing acceptance of Darwinism was seen by many in the church as a major threat to the authority of the scriptures. Between 1910 and 1913, American laymen Milton and Lyman Stewart published and distributed a series of small booklets entitled *The Fundamentals: A Testimony to the Truth*. They asserted that there were five fundamentals of the faith:

1. The Deity of Jesus Christ
2. The Virgin Birth
3. The Blood Atonement
4. The Bodily Resurrection
5. The Inerrancy of the Scriptures.

I think that the word “fundamentalism” today has a somewhat negative connotation. However, I doubt that many Christians would object to the five fundamentals stated above. The essays by the Stewart brothers that addressed Genesis 1 asserted the importance of recognizing these events as actual historical occurrences, fundamental to everything in scripture, but left open the question of the creation days length. However, at a 1919 conference in Philadelphia, fundamentalism became an organized movement with the founding of the World Christian Fundamentals Association (WCFA). This group considered the question of what qualifies a person to be a true Christian. Since they perceived Darwinism to be the great evil of the day, they adopted Ussher’s chronology as a necessary belief. They believed that this was the only way to counter the rise of godless science.

One of the most outspoken critics of Darwinism in the early 1900s was a Seventh-Day-Adventist layman and amateur geologist name George McCready Price. In 1923 he published a book entitled *The New Geology*. In this book he claimed that the fossil record and all the earth’s geologic features could be explained as the result of the Genesis flood. Price was an excellent speaker and became a spokesman for the fundamentalist movement.

The issue received great notoriety in the Scopes trial of 1925. This trial took place in Dayton Tennessee and was perceived as a showdown between fundamentalist Christianity and science. In a series of scathing newspaper articles H. L. Mencken implied that, under defense attorney Clarence Darrows cross-examination, William Jennings Bryan was forced to admit that the six consecutive

24-hour periods of Biblical creation must be incorrect. Actually, Bryan went into the trial believing that the Bible allowed for long creation days. The trial actually was more showmanship than a true confrontation between the two positions. The scientists assembled by the defense team were not allowed to testify in the trial. In a strange move Bryan agreed to take the stand and be questioned by Darrow with the understanding that he would be able to question Darrow later. Here is a portion of that interchange [12].

DARROW: Have you any idea how old the earth is?

BRYAN: No.

DARROW: The book you have introduced in evidence fails you, doesn't it? [referring to the Bible]

BRYAN: I don't think it does, Mr. Darrow.

DARROW: Let's see whether it does. Is this the one?

BRYAN: That is the one, I think.

DARROW: It says B.C. 4004.

BRYAN: That is Bishop Ussher's calculation.

DARROW: That is printed in the Bible you introduced?

BRYAN: Yes, sir.

DARROW: And numerous other Bibles?

BRYAN: Yes, sir.

DARROW: Printed in the Bible in general use in Tennessee?

BRYAN: I couldn't say.

DARROW: And Scofield's Bible?

BRYAN: I couldn't say about that.

DARROW: You have seen it somewhere else?

BRYAN: I think that is the chronology actually used.

DARROW: Does the Bible you have introduced for the jury's consideration say that?

BRYAN: Well, you'll have to ask those who introduced that.

DARROW: You haven't practiced law for a long time, so I will ask you if that is the King James version that was introduced. That is your marking, and I assume it is.

BRYAN: I think that is the same one.

DARROW: There is no doubt about it, is there, gentlemen?

STEWART: That is the same one.

DARROW: Would you say the earth was only 4,000 years old?

BRYAN: Oh no, I think it is much older than that.

DARROW: How much?

BRYAN: I couldn't say.

DARROW: Do you say whether the Bible itself says it is older than that?

BRYAN: I don't think the Bible says itself whether it is older or not.

DARROW: Do you think the earth was made in six days?

BRYAN: Not six days of twenty-four hours.

DARROW: Doesn't it say so?

BRYAN: No, sir.

...

DARROW: All right. Does the statement "The morning and the evening were the first day" and "The morning and the evening were the second day" mean anything to you?

BRYAN: I do not think it necessarily means a twenty-four hour day.

DARROW: You do not?

BRYAN: No.

DARROW: What do you consider it to be?

BRYAN: I have not attempted to explain it. If you will take the second chapter — let me have the book. The fourth verse of the second chapter says, "Those are the generation of the heavens and of the earth, when they were erected in the day the Lord God made the earth and the heavens." The word "day" there in the very next chapter is used to describe a period. I do not see that there is necessity for considering the words, "the evening and the morning" as meaning necessarily a twenty-four hour day in the day when the Lord made the heavens and the earth.

...

After the questioning the defense pled guilty, ending the trial. Darrow was primarily interested in appealing the case to a higher court. Thus, Bryan didn't get to question Darrow or to present his final summation. All that most people saw were the biased newspaper accounts of the trial. In the period following the trial there was no general agreement about which side had prevailed. Today, most people's conception of the Scopes trial is based on the play and movie "Inherit the Wind."

This rendition of the scopes trial contains many historical inaccuracies. For a good historical account I recommend the Pulitzer Prize winning book **Summer for the Gods** by Edward Larson [14].

In 1961 Henry Morris, a civil engineering professor, and John Whitcomb, a theology professor, published a book entitled *The Genesis Flood* [5]. This book, like the earlier book of Price, argued that the creation period consisted of six 24-hour days occurring a few thousand years ago and that the geological formations we see today are largely the result of the flood described in Genesis. This viewpoint is sometimes called the young-earth view. Unlike Price, these authors had professional degrees. In 1972 the Institute for Creation Research (ICR) was founded in San Diego by several scientists for the purpose of presenting this young-earth view of creation to the public. Through their efforts to legalize the teaching of creation science in the schools, the name “creationism” has come to be associated exclusively with this young-earth view. In many academic circles, the term “creationist” is considered to be derogatory.

In recent years Hugh Ross and others have lectured and written a number of books advocating the position that the sequence of events described in Genesis is correct, but that the creation days represent long periods of time. This viewpoint is sometimes called “Progressive Creationism”. Progressive creationists generally believe that the creation process is completely under God’s control and that God intervenes at specific times with completely new creations. They typically oppose evolution except in the limited sense of small variations within a species. Most also believe in a fairly recent creation date for man (less than a hundred thousand years). They claim that the Genesis account agrees well with current findings in science.

Another form of old-earth creationism is “Theistic Evolution”. Advocates of this position claim that God used evolution as His method of creation. One of the primary advocates of this position was the French philosopher and Roman Catholic Priest Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881–1955). Recently this viewpoint has been popularized by Francis Collins, the director of the human genome project [13]. Proponents of this view usually don’t take a definite position on the meaning of “day”, but they do interpret Genesis 1–2 in a non-literal sense.

Some young-earth advocates have accused these old-earth scientists of being heretics and not Bible believing Christians. I have not found this to be the case. I would hope that in the future this debate can be carried on in a more respectful manner.

In 1977 a group of Biblical scholars formed the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy (ICBI). Initial efforts were focused on defining Biblical Inerrancy, but the council later began looking at specific issues. In 1982 an ICBI summit looked carefully at the question of the age of the universe and the earth. They heard presentations by young earth and old earth proponents as well as Biblical Hebrew scholars. The council determined that belief in Biblical Inerrancy did not require adherence to a particular position on the age of the universe/earth. The position statement was signed by everyone in attendance except the young earth advocate Henry Morris.

Attempts in 1990 to force a young-earth view of creation into doctrinal statements and to make adherence to a young-earth interpretation a condition for church membership led both the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) and Westminster Theological Seminary to convene panels of

scholars to study the question. Both panels concluded that the Genesis creation days could be faithfully interpreted as 24-hour days, long time periods, or as a literary device. Their reports are contained on the web site <http://www.reasons.org/> maintained by the Reasons to Believe organization founded by Hugh Ross.

An interpretation of the Genesis creation account that is of fairly recent origin is the “Framework” or “Literary Framework” viewpoint. Although there were some hints of this viewpoint in the writings of the early church Fathers, it was popularized by the writings of Meridith Klein (1922–2007) and Henri Blocher. They believed that the days were normal days, but that they should be interpreted metaphorically as part of a literary form. They maintained that the creation account is historical, but that the events are ordered the way they are for literary reasons and may not be chronological and could overlap.

### **3 The Language of Genesis 1**

Some of the difficulties involved in interpreting the creation account relate to the Hebrew language in which it was written [8]. First of all, Biblical Hebrew contained very few words relative to modern languages. Strong's exhaustive concordance lists 8674 words in the Hebrew dictionary. The actual number of root words is usually taken to be 2552. By way of contrast, the Merriam Webster Collegiate Dictionary lists over 165,000 words and the Oxford English Dictionary (2nd edition) lists over 615,000 words (over 1,000,000 including scientific words). Therefore, the Hebrew vocabulary was much smaller than most modern languages such as English. It follows that most Hebrew words had several meanings. Also, it was not possible in Biblical Hebrew to express many of the nuances we find in English.

The small size of the Hebrew vocabulary also means that the English words used to translate the Hebrew often have additional connotations that were not present in the original. For example, when we think of the words “earth” and “heavens” we think of a roughly spherical planet orbiting the sun in a vast universe containing many other planets and suns. However, to the original hearers, the Hebrew word for “earth” would likely have referred to the ground surrounding them, and the word for “heavens” would likely have meant the sky they saw above.

The words in most languages are made up of consonants and vowels. In speech, consonants involve motion of the lips or tongue whereas vowels involve air flow deeper in the throat. Almost all words in Biblical Hebrew consisted entirely of consonants. The root words usually consisted of three consonants. Vowel marks were not introduced into the Hebrew language until about 150 A.D. Therefore, most words in written Hebrew corresponded to several spoken words. For example, if English words were written this way, the words bread, board, bard, and bird would all be spelled “brd”. In Biblical Hebrew, the meaning of a word almost always depends on the context.

In addition, verbs in Biblical Hebrew do not have tenses related to time. Thus, we cannot tell from the verb itself whether the action takes place in the past, in the present, or in the future. Hebrew verbs only indicate a completed action (perfect form) or an incomplete action (imperfect form). In Biblical Hebrew the verbs do not specify the duration or time ordering of the actions. It was

mentioned in connection with the Gap Theory that the word translated as “was” in the phrase “the earth was without form” could also have been translated as “became”.

Most of the controversy concerning Genesis 1 centers on the meaning of the Hebrew word “yom” (pronounced yome) for day. In Biblical Hebrew it can mean a 24-hour day, the daylight hours, or a finite period of time. Its most common meaning is “daylight”. It is only rarely used to represent a 24-hour day. Unlike English, the original Biblical Hebrew had no other word to express a finite period of time of unspecified duration. Some writers have suggested that the Hebrew word “olam” could have been used for that purpose. However, this word only came to mean an age or era in postbiblical writings. In biblical times “olam” meant forever, always, eternity, etc., i.e. periods of time without a beginning or end. The following are some examples in which “yom” refers to a finite period of time.

**Numbers 3:1** *These are the generations of Aaron and Moses in the <sup>yom</sup> day that the Lord spoke with Moses in mount Sinai. (From Exodus 34:28 we have So he was with the Lord forty days and forty nights)*

**Genesis 2:4** *These are the generations of the heavens and of the earth when they were <sup>yom</sup> created, in the day that the Lord made the earth and the heavens.*

**Genesis 2:17** *But of the trees of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shall not eat of <sup>yom</sup> it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die. ( Genesis 5:5 states that Adam lived 930 years)*

**Psalms 90:4** (attributed to Moses) *For a thousand years in thy sight are but as yesterday <sup>yom</sup> when it is past and as a watch in the night.*

**Isaiah 34:8** *For it is the <sup>yom</sup> day of the Lords vengeance, and the year of recompenses for the controversy of Zion.*

**Hosea 6:2** *After two days he [God] will restore us [Israel]; on the third <sup>yom</sup> day he will restore us.*

The seventh “yom” in Genesis 1 is often taken to be a long period of time (possibly extending to the present) since the phrase “and there was evening and there was morning” is omitted.

**Hebrews 4:4–11** *For somewhere [God] has spoken about the seventh day in these words: “And on the seventh day God rested from all his work.” ... It still remains that some will enter that rest. ... There remains, then, a sabbath-rest for the people of God; for anyone who enters God’s rest also rests from his own work, just as God did from his. Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest.*

It is possible that the seven days in Genesis 1 are, at least in part, a literary device. Ancient Near Eastern literature, particularly from Mesopotamia and Canaan, provides numerous examples of the use of seven days as a literary framework to circumscribe the completion of a significant or catastrophic event[7]. The pattern in these works runs uniformly as follows: “One day, a second day, so and so happens; a third day, a fourth day, such and such occurs; a fifth day, a sixth day, so and so takes place; then, on the seventh day, the story comes to its exciting conclusion.” Genesis 1:1–2:3 modifies this pattern from three sets of two days followed by a concluding day to two sets of three days followed by a concluding day. On days 1–3 God gives form to the universe. The characteristic verbs used in these three days are separate and gather. On days 4–6 God fills his creation. The characteristic verbs here are teem, fill, be fruitful, increase.

In some translations we find the phrases “the first day”, “the second day”, “the third day”, “the fourth day”, “the fifth day”, and “the sixth day” associated with the days of creation. Actually, the definite article ‘the’ is not present in the Hebrew. In Hebrew the article ‘the’ is expressed by prefixing a word with the letter ‘heh’. Elsewhere in the Old Testament where expressions such as “the first day”, “the second day”, etc. are used, both the number and the word ‘day’ are prefixed with ‘heh’. In Genesis one, only the sixth day has a prefix ‘heh’ and it only on the number. Thus, the use of numbers with the word ‘day’ in Genesis chapter one has a very unusual construction. The use of the article on the sixth day seems to provide a special emphasis.

Each of the six days ends with the phrase “and there was evening and there was morning ...” Authors Mark Van Bebber and Paul Taylor [11] wrote, “This phrase [evening and morning] is used 38 times in the Old Testament, not counting Genesis 1. Each time, without exception, the phrase refers to a normal 24-hour day.” However, the old-earth adherents point out that

- The word “day” appears in none these references.
- In only a few of these do the words “evening” and “morning” even occur in the same sentence.
- The phrase “evening and morning” occurs only once. In Psalm 55:17 David said, “Evening, and morning, and at noon will I pray.”
- 24-hour days were usually marked by “evening to evening” and occasionally “morning to morning.”
- The exact phrase “and there was evening and there was morning” occurs only in Genesis 1.

The verses

*You sweep men away in the sleep of death; they are like the new grass of the morning  
— though in the morning it springs up new, by evening it is dry and withered.*  
Psalms 90:5–6 NIV

are an example of where “evening” and “morning” are used figuratively to delimit a period of time.

Van Bebber and Taylor also said that 358 out of the 359 times “yom” is used with an ordinal modifier, it represents a 24-hour day. However,

- There is no rule in Hebrew grammar that requires this interpretation.
- All of the 358 cases mentioned refer to human activity where the 24-hour meaning would be natural. Genesis 1 and Hosea 6:2 refer to God’s activity.

It is often argued that the required Sabbath observance indicates that the days were ordinary 24-hour days.

**Exodus 20:9,11** *Six days you shall labor . . . , but the seventh day is a Sabbath. . . . For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth . . . , but he rested on the seventh day.*

Hebrew scholar Gleason Archer noted, “By no means does this [Exodus 20:9–11] demonstrate that 24-hour intervals were involved in the first six ‘days,’ any more than the eight-day celebration of the Feast of Tabernacles proves that the wilderness wanderings under Moses occupied only eight days.” In addition, Leviticus 25 speaks of a Sabbath year. Thus, it could be argued that the Sabbath is not tied to a particular time duration, but to the pattern of one in seven.

Let us now look at a few other Hebrew words that occur in the creation narrative. Notice that the meaning of these words is not as tightly constrained as we find in English.

**reshiyth** (ray-sheeth´): the first (in place, time, order, or rank), the beginning. In Genesis 1 it occurs in the form **bereshith**. The prefix **be** can mean in, at, or on. Bereshith is the title of the book in Hebrew. In English we often think of the beginning as a point in time, but the Hebrew word can also refer to an initial period of time.

**Elohiym** (el-o-heem´): The plural form of **Eloahh** (el-o´-ah). It is a combination of the words **el** (the strong one) and **alah** (to bind oneself by oath). Thus Elohiym is the mighty and faithful one. It is the only name for God used in Genesis one.

**ruwach** (roo´-akh): The word for wind, spirit, or breath. When it occurs together with Elohiym it refers to the Holy Spirit.

**shamayim** (shaw-mah´-yim): The sky, the heavens, or the spiritual realm. These three realms are sometimes referred to as the first heaven, the second heaven, and the third heaven.

**erets** (eh´-rets): Can mean earth, field, ground, or land.

**towb** (tobe): Can mean good, beautiful, or best.

**adam** (aw-dawm´): The word for human, man or mankind.

In the Hebrew there are three primary creation verbs used in the first chapter of Genesis. They are “bara”, “asah”, and “hayah”. Their meaning and usage in Genesis 1 are given below.

**bara** (baw-raw´): to create; to bring forth something that is radically new. It doesn’t necessarily mean that something is made out of nothing as can be seen in the description of man’s creation (Gen 2:7) where man is formed from the dust of the ground.

*God **created** the heavens and the earth Gen 1:1*

*So God **created** the great creatures of the sea and every living and moving thing with which the water teems, according to their kinds, and every winged bird according to its kind. Gen 1:21*

*So God **created** man in his own image Gen 1:27*

**asah** (aw-saw´): make; produce; fabricate. This verb doesn’t necessarily imply that something is being made out of something else, you have to look at the context. In fact it doesn’t necessarily mean that anything is made. It can have the meaning of appointing or designating something to perform a certain task. This could be the meaning on the fourth day.

*God **made** two great lights — the greater light to govern the day and the lesser light to govern the night. He also **made** the stars. Gen 1:16*

*God **made** the wild animals according to their kinds, the livestock according to their kinds, and all the creatures that move along the ground according to their kinds. Gen 1:25*

*Then God said, “Let us **make** man in our image Gen 1:26*

*God saw all that he had **made**, and it was very good. Gen 1:31*

**hayah** (haw-yaw): cause to appear or arise; come into existence.

*Let there **be** light Gen 1:3*

*Let there **be** an expanse between the waters to separate water from water. Gen 1:6*

*“Let the water under the sky **be** gathered to one place, and let dry ground appear.” Gen 1:9*

*“Let there be lights in the expanse of the sky to separate the day from the night,*  
Gen1:14

*and let them be lights in the expanse of the sky to give light on the earth.* Gen 1:15

*Be fruitful and increase in number;* Gen 1:28

The literary structure of the creation account is very interesting. It doesn't have the usual parallelism found in Hebrew poetry (repeated lines that say the same thing in different words). However, it is not a typical narrative either. It has a repetitive structure where each creation day begins with “And God said” and ends with “and there was evening and there was morning . . .” It also uses names for various aspects of the creation that are not commonly used. For example, none of the animal groups are referred to by their common Hebrew names except man. Also, the sun and moon are referred to as “the greater light” and “the lesser light,” terms used nowhere else in Old Testament. In verse 6 the sky is referred to as the “expanse.” The Old Testament Scholar John Collins calls the Genesis creation account an Exalted Narrative and cautions against being “literalistic” in our interpretation. It is said that the ancient Hebrews did not allow anyone to expound on the first chapter of Genesis until they were 30 years of age. They obviously recognized that this was a difficult passage. Maybe, we too should show some humility in approaching this passage.

## 4 Science and Revelation

The church has long maintained that God reveals himself to us both through the scriptures and through nature.

*For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities — his eternal power and divine nature have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.* Rom 1:20

But, are these means of revelation separate? Should science play a role in the interpretation of scripture? This question is relevant to the study of the creation account in Genesis 1 since many maintain that the desire to conform to the present view of science is the only reason for considering the days of creation to be anything other than normal 24-hour days. Philosopher and theologian J.P. Moreland addressed this question in a question-and-answer session following a lecture at the Northshore Church in Everett, Washington on February 2, 2002

*I doubt, sir, that you or anybody else in the room takes the Biblical passages that say that ‘Jesus will call his angels from the four corners of the earth’ to teach a flat earth. I also doubt that anyone in here says that when the sun rises and sets it literally means an earth-centered universe. But you must understand that . . . there were times when*

*the church interpreted the text that taught that God/Christ will call his angels from the four corners of the world to teach very obviously that the world has four corners. The text says that. You can read it until you're blue in the face, and it says that the Earth has four corners. Similarly, the Bible says the sun rises and sets. Now, that's what it says. You can dance around it all you want. That's what the text says. But there's nobody in here that believes that. No one in here believes the earth has four corners. And so, what we've done is taken that language and interpreted it metaphorically. Similarly, with the rising and setting of the sun, we treat that . . . phenomenologically — we say that's the language of description; it is not meant to be taken literally.*

...

*Now, when it comes to the . . . flat earth and the rising and the setting of the sun: it was scientific evidence that caused people to say 'maybe we'd better re-look at those passages.' There was nothing exegetically or strictly in the Hebrew grammar and syntax. There was absolutely nothing about the literary genre of the passage or the historical-grammatical method of interpretation that could tell you anything at all about one way or the other — it was scientific evidence. So now the question was raised by the church interpreters: 'Is there anything essential to this passage that's violated if we take the four corners of the earth to be metaphorical?' Now, their answer was in that particular passage, 'no.' That particular text can allow for that without violating the teachings of the scriptures in that particular text. Now, is this procedure risky in other passages? You bet. But does it follow that it should never be applied? No, you've gotta take texts — each text, on its own. So, the devil's in the details, and you've got to be very, very careful.*

It is clear from these remarks that science can play a role in the interpretation of scripture, but that it must be done carefully. We also need to keep in mind that the Bible was never intended to be a textbook on science. The following is a statement by John Calvin in 1534.

*The whole point of scripture is to bring us to a knowledge of Jesus Christ — and having come to know him (and all that this implies), we should come to a halt and not expect to learn more. Scripture provides us with spectacles through which we may view the world as God's creation and self-expression; it does not, and never was intended, to provide us with an infallible repository of astronomical and medical information. The natural sciences are thus effectively emancipated from theological restrictions.*

There is a great deal of science that supports the Christian world view. Consider these quotes by some famous scientists [16]

*There is no doubt that a parallel exists between the big bang as an event and the Christian notion of creation from nothing. (George Smoot, Astronomer, U.C. Berkeley, Nobel Prize in Physics, 2006)*

*Astronomy leads us to a unique event, a universe which was created out of nothing, one with the very delicate balance needed to provide exactly the conditions required*

*to permit life, and one which has an underlying (one might say, supernatural) plan.* (Arno Penzias, Nobel Prize in Physics, 1978)

*An honest man, armed with all the knowledge available to us now, could only state that in some sense, the origin of life appears at the moment to almost be a miracle, so many are the conditions which would have had to have been satisfied to get it going.* (Francis Crick, Co-discoverer of DNA)

*Precious little in the way of biochemical evolution could have happened on earth. If one counts the number of trial assemblies of amino acids that are needed to give rise to the enzymes, the probability of their discovery by random shufflings turns out to be less than 1 in  $10^{40,000}$ .* (Chandra Wickramasinghe, Professor & Chairman, Department of Applied Mathematics and Astronomy, University College, Wales)

*It remains true, as every paleontologist knows, that most new species, genera, and families and nearly all new categories above the level of families appear in the [fossil] record suddenly and are not led up to by known, gradual, completely continuous transitional sequences.* (Stephen J. Gould, Paleontologist, Harvard)

*Unfortunately, the origins of most higher categories [of life] are shrouded in mystery: Commonly new higher categories appear abruptly in the fossil record without evidence of transitional forms.* (Colin Patterson, Senior paleontologist, British Museum of Natural History, London)

I think that many Christians today are fearful of science. We need to remember that all truth is God's truth whether revealed by observation of nature or by the words of scripture. When both are correctly interpreted there can be no conflict.

## **5 Interpretations of the Creation Days**

In this section I will summarize the four major interpretations of the Genesis creation days as well as two of the lesser known interpretations. A more complete discussion can be found in the Report of the Creation Study Committee to the 28th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA), 6 July 2000[1].

1. The Calendar-Day Interpretation — often called the literal view, the traditional view, or the twenty-four-hour view, the Calendar-Day perspective may be described very simply. It accepts the first chapter of Genesis as historical and chronological in character and takes the creation week as consisting of six twenty-four-hour days, followed by a twenty-four-hour Sabbath. Since Adam and Eve were created as mature adults, so the rest of creation

came forth from its Maker. The Garden included full-grown trees and animals, which Adam named. Those holding this view believe this is the normal understanding of the creation account and that this has been the most commonly held understanding of this account both in Jewish and Christian history. They believe that the only reason many reject this view is a desire to conform to the current view of science.

2. **The Day-Age Interpretation** — the six days of the Day-Age view are understood in the same sense as “in that day” of Isaiah 11:10–11 — in other words, as periods of indefinite length and not of 24 hours duration. The six days are taken as sequential but as overlapping and perhaps merging into one another. According to this view, the Genesis 1 creation week describes events from the point of view of the earth, which is being prepared as the habitation for man. In this context, the explanation of day four is that the sun only became visible on that day, as atmospheric conditions allowed the previous alternation of light and darkness to be perceived as coming from the previously created sun and other heavenly bodies. The Day-Age construct preserves the general sequence of events as portrayed in the text and is not merely a response to Charles Darwin and evolutionary science. From ancient times there was recognition among Bible scholars that the word “day” could mean an extended period of time.
3. **The Framework Interpretation** — the distinctive feature of the Framework view is its understanding of the week (not the days as such) as a metaphor. According to this interpretation, Moses used the metaphor of the week to narrate God’s acts of creation. Thus, God’s supernatural creative words or fiats are real and historical but the exact timing is left unspecified. The purpose of the metaphor is to call Adam to imitate God in work, with the promise of entering His Sabbath rest. Creation events are grouped in two triads of days: Days 1–3 (creations kingdoms) are paralleled by Days 4–6 (creations kings). Adam is king of the earth; God is the King of Creation. Also Days 1–3 can be looked upon as days of forming and Days 4–6 can be looked upon as days of filling.
4. **The Analogical Days Interpretation** — According to the Analogical view, the “days” of Genesis 1 are God’s workdays, analogous (but not necessarily identical) to human workdays. They set a pattern for our rhythm of work and rest. The six days represent periods of God’s historical supernatural activity in preparing and populating the earth as a place for humans to live, love, work, and worship. These days are broadly consecutive. That is, they are successive periods of unspecified length. They may overlap in part, or they may reflect logical rather than chronological criteria for grouping certain events on certain days. The major aspect of this interpretation is that the days of creation are viewed from God’s perspective.

## 5.1 Other Interpretations

- **The Intermittent Day Interpretation** — In this view the days are ordinary 24-hour days separated by periods of unspecified length. Thus, the days are “normal” and consecutive, but not contiguous. The main thrust of this interpretation is to harmonize the account in Genesis with the long time periods believed in by most scientists.

- The Days of Divine Fiat Interpretation — This is a view proposed by the English physicist Alan Hayward in his book **Creation and Evolution** [10]. Here the days are six consecutive 24-hour days in which God said his instructions, while the fulfillment of those instructions took place over unspecified and possibly overlapping periods of time. Hayward interprets the result following each of God’s pronouncements as a parenthetical expression (there were no parentheses in Biblical Hebrew, but translators sometimes insert them). For example, he would write write the account of the first day as follows

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

The result of God’s pronouncement is sure, but may take place over an unspecified time period.

- The Functional Interpretation of Days — A fairly recent interpretation of the creation account in Genesis 1 was given by John H. Walton, Professor of Old Testament at Wheaton College[15]. He asserts that while the creation account in Genesis was written for us, it was not written to us. He contends that we can only understand this account when we attempt to see how the original recipients would have viewed it. One of his main points is that the ancients tended to view existence and creation in functional terms rather than in material terms. An analogy he gives is the creation of a company. When does a company begin to exist? He says that the construction of a building or the hiring of employees does not create a company. The company begins to exist once it is organized around a purpose and begins to carry on business in pursuit of that purpose. Today we tend to view creation in strictly material terms, i.e. in terms of physical properties and processes. Walton affirms that God certainly created the material world, but he contends that this was not the subject of the opening chapters of Genesis. Walton claims that the first day establishes the function of time; the second day the function of weather; the third day the function of food production; the fourth day the function of the luminaries in establishing days, years and seasons; the fifth day the functions of swimming, flight, and reproduction of birds and sea creatures. On the sixth day the animals and man are given the role of dwelling on the land and reproducing according to their own kind. The sixth day is special in that humans are created in the image of God and are given the role of rulers within God’s creation. The seventh day is seen as the climax where God assumes his throne in His Holy temple (the whole cosmos) as the ruler and sustainer of all creation. Rest is seen not as a cessation of activity, but as the establishment of normality and stability with God in control.

There are many other interpretations, but these should give you an idea of the principal interpretations. Let us now look at the principal arguments for and against the four major views described above.

## 6 Arguments For and Against

**Arguments for the Calendar Day Interpretation:** Some of the major arguments for this interpretation are the following:

- This interpretation is the most natural. Probably most people interpret the days this way when they first read this passage. It is the view taken by most (but not all) Christian scholars throughout the history of the church.
- The use of evening and morning and ordinal numbers with the days points to a normal 24-hour day interpretation. This was discussed previously in the section describing the language of Genesis 1.
- This view gives strong support both to the historicity of the account and to the miraculous nature of creation.
- This view doesn't have to deal with the problem of death occurring before God's curse.
- This interpretation meshes well with other passages of scripture and provides a natural framework for the Sabbath observance.

**Arguments against the Calendar Day Interpretation:** Some of the major arguments against this interpretation are the following:

- The major argument against this viewpoint is that its time scale disagrees with the time scale believed in by most scientists. For example, the fossil record, radiometric dating, the time for light to reach us from distant galaxies, the background radiation temperature, and the expansion rate of the universe seem to point to a very old creation. The proponents of the calendar day interpretation caution us that it is dangerous to tie our interpretations of scripture to the current view of science, as this view is likely to change in the future. However, most scientists believe that a significant change in these estimates would call into question a large part of Physics.
- Another argument against this interpretation is that it seems like Adam has an awful lot to do on day six (maintaining the Garden, studying the animals, naming the animals, relating to Eve).
- In addition, a young age for the earth means that there must have been a very rapid expansion in the number of species following the flood. In fact opponents estimate that the rate of creation of new species would have to have been much greater than is claimed by Darwinists.
- Some see the fact that the sun and moon were not mentioned until day four to be a problem. The proponents of the calendar-day interpretation claim that God himself provided light and darkness during the first three days. He did this to highlight the fact that God is the one who determines the length of days, not the sun and the moon which were worshiped by many

ancient cultures. However, it is not obvious to many that the first three days, at least, were ordinary days.

- The Bible in Leviticus 25 speaks of a Sabbath year as well as Sabbath day. Thus, the Sabbath is not tied to a particular time duration, but to the pattern of one in seven.

Of all the interpretations, the proponents of the calendar day view seem to be the least tolerant of other viewpoints. However, the following quotation by a pair of young-earth creationists is very encouraging [3]

*As we shall argue later, recent creationism is an attempt to reinterpret the data, not to deny their existence or importance. As it is now interpreted, the data are mostly against us. Well and good. We take this seriously. Eventually, failure to deal with that data in a recent creationist scientific theory would be sufficient reason to give up the project. We think, however, that progress is being made. The potential rewards outweigh the liabilities. Theistic naturalists and old-earth creationists are free to develop their ideas. Recent creationists will do the same. In the end, we are confident that the world, and the creator, will reveal the truth of the matter. In the meantime, dogmatic pronouncements from any camp are counterproductive. Recent creationists should humbly agree that their view is, at the moment, implausible on purely scientific grounds. They can make common cause with those who reject naturalism, like old-earth creationists, to establish their most basic beliefs. When the dust has cleared from that intellectual revolution, they can see how the landscape looks. It would not be surprising if many things once “known” for sure would be less certain. This of course might include the age of the cosmos.* **Paul Nelson and John Mark Reynolds**

**Arguments for the day-age interpretation:** This viewpoint maintains the historical and chronological nature of the passage while allowing for the longer time periods accepted by most scientists. It is also largely consistent with the order in the fossil record. This interpretation takes the Hebrew word “yom” for day to mean a finite but indefinite period of time. Since this is one of the allowable meanings of “yom”, this interpretation can also be considered a “literal” interpretation. While the days are assumed roughly consecutive, this viewpoint does allow for some overlap. They believe that God created many new species prior to the creation of Adam, balancing those becoming extinct. Since God rested after the creation of man, this would account for the fact that, since the appearance of man, there doesn’t seem to have been any new animal species come into existence while a large number of species have become extinct.

Regardless of how one feels about this interpretation, it should be acknowledged that it has been instrumental in removing some of the barriers that have prevented many scientists from taking the Bible seriously. The same can be said for Theistic Evolution.

**Arguments against the day-age interpretation:** One of the biggest points of contention with this viewpoint centers on the question of when death entered the world. If the fossils were from

periods prior to the time of Adam, then there was death before Adam and Eves rebellion and the resulting curse.

**Romans 5:12** *Sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned.*

**1 Cor 15:21–23** *For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. But each in his own turn: Christ, the first fruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him.*

The question is whether these verses refer to all death or only to the death of humans? Could there have been animal death before the fall? When considering whether all death is the result of Adam's and Eve's sin we should not overlook the fact that Adam and Eve were not the first creatures to sin against God. Satan or Lucifer (meaning morning star) and his followers were apparently the first (see Isaiah 14:12–15)

**Jude 6** *And the angels who did not keep their positions of authority but abandoned their own homethese he has kept in darkness, bound with everlasting chains for judgment on the great Day.*

Another objection voiced against this interpretation is that the desire to conform to present day science tends to de-emphasize the miraculous nature of the creation events.

**Arguments for the framework interpretation:** The week was used by a number of early near-east civilizations as a framework to describe important events. There does seem to be a parallelism between days one through three and days four through six. Days one and four are both concerned with daylight and night, light and darkness. Days two and five are both concerned with the skies and the seas along with their inhabitants. Days three and six deal with the dry land and with the vegetation, animals and people that live there. Days one through three are days of forming and days four through six are days of filling.

**Day 1** light

**Day 2** Sky separating waters  
above and waters below

**Day 3** Land and vegetation

**Day 4** Sun, moon, and stars

**Day 5** Birds of the air and  
creatures of the sea

**Day 6** Land animals and man

**Day 7** God rested

In this interpretation there is no time duration or order associated with the various creation events. The order is determined primarily by literary considerations. Thus, this interpretation is not in

conflict with science in regards to the age of the earth or the time ordering of events. In the second chapter of Genesis it appears that man is created before the plants and animals. This is used by some to argue that the ordering of events in Genesis 1 is not chronological. The framework interpretation is held by many theistic evolutionists.

**Arguments against the framework interpretation:** Opponents of this interpretation feel that treating the creation week as a metaphor weakens the historical nature of the narrative. Other portions of scripture do treat the creation events as being historical. Proponents of this viewpoint maintain that their non-literal interpretation does not negate the historical nature of the events being described. Many feel that the use of numbers with the days does indicate some sort of chronological ordering. It is also argued that this interpretation is too complicated to be understood by the original readers and that it has only appeared recently in the history of the church. There were, however, some such as Augustine who had a non-literal interpretation of the creation days.

**Arguments for the analogical days interpretation:** This interpretation shares much in common with the day-age interpretation. In both of these interpretations the sequence of event is maintained, but a day could represent an extended period of time to a viewer on the earth. The analogical days viewpoint differs in that it looks at the events from God's perspective rather than from an earth dweller's perspective. This interpretation strongly implies that we should pattern our work week after God's work week.

**Arguments against the analogical days interpretation:** Many scholars feel that the distinctions made in this interpretation are too subtle to be appreciated by the original audience. In addition there does not seem to be any other portion of scripture where this viewpoint is taken.

## 7 Common Ground

We have talked about the ways in which various viewpoints differ in the interpretation of Genesis 1. However, Genesis has some clear messages that don't depend on how we view the days of creation. The following statement was taken from the book **Authentic Christianity: From the Writings of John Stott**, p. 89, InterVarsity Press.

*God's Word is designed to make us Christians, not scientists, and to lead us to eternal life through faith in Jesus Christ. It was not God's intention to reveal in Scripture what human beings could discover by their own investigations and experiments. So the first three chapters of Genesis reveal in particular four spiritual truths which could never be discovered by the scientific method. First, that God made everything. Secondly, that he made it out of nothing. There was no original raw material as eternal as himself on which he could work. Thirdly, that he made man male and female in his own image.*

*Fourthly, that everything which he made was ‘very good’. When it left his hand it was perfect. Sin and suffering were foreign invasions into his lovely world, and spoiled it.*

The young-earth creationists J. Ligon Duncan III and David W. Hall present some similar points in the book **The Genesis Debate** [2]:

- God created the world and is distinct from it (but not unconcerned about it).
- God shaped his creation from formlessness into order and filled it from emptiness to fullness.
- God’s world was originally good and, therefore, different from the corrupted world in which we now live.
- Man’s sin is entirely responsible for corrupting original creation.
- God’s character (justice and mercy) is revealed as He responds to the three “low points” of primeval history: the Fall, the Flood, and Babel.

I hope that you can see from the above that, as Christians, we can agree on many important aspects of creation while possibly holding differing views on the length of the days.

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