

Excursus on Creation of Life and Biological Diversity

b. A Critique of the Literal Interpretation

We're talking about various interpretations of Genesis chapter 1, and we have begun our discussion with the literal interpretation. Last time I explained that most evangelical exegetes will say that these narratives are meant to be taken in a sort of figurative and yet historical sense. The underlying historical events actually happened, but nevertheless the narrative is told in figurative speech that shouldn't be pressed for literal precision. So if Genesis 1-3 is a kind of historical but figurative genre of writing (that is to say, it covers historical events but it uses poetic or figurative language to describe them) then it would be a mistake to make unwarranted demands upon the text by interpreting it literally.

In particular, for example, it would be unwarranted to press the Hebrew word *yom* for literal precision to mean that the Earth was created in six consecutive 24-hour days. For example, in Genesis 2:4 we have this word *yom* used in a clearly metaphorical way. In Genesis 2:4 we read, "This is the account of the heavens and the earth when they were created. In the day that the Lord made the Earth and the heavens. . . ." In this verse it refers to the entire creative week of Genesis 1 as a day. So in the Genesis account itself we find that it uses the word *yom* (day) in a metaphorical sense to describe the entire creation week and not just a 24-hour period of time.

One of the best proof texts to which literalists can appeal for thinking that a six-day creation is literal in Genesis 1 comes from another book of the Pentateuch, namely, Exodus. If you look at

Exodus 20:9-11 you find the Pentateuchal author reflecting back upon Genesis 1 and he says in Exodus 20:8-11:

Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath of the Lord your God; in it you shall not do any work, you or your son or your daughter, your male or your female servant or your cattle or your sojourner who stays with you. For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and made it holy.

Here the passage says that God made the heavens and the Earth, the sea, and all that is in them in six days. So literal creationists will say that this shows that Genesis 1 is, in fact, intended to refer to a literal week of six consecutive 24-hour days.

But I think that that may be pressing the passage too hard. What the Exodus passage is referring to is the literary account contained in Genesis. It's saying that in that account God creates in six days. What it stresses is the pattern that is set down in Genesis 1 – the pattern of God's laboring on six creative days and then resting on the seventh day. That pattern is the same that Israel should observe in its literal workweek. But that isn't to say that because the pattern is the same that the periods or the durations described in Genesis are also therefore literal calendar days. Notice how this sabbath commandment is repeated in Exodus 31:12-17:

The Lord spoke to Moses, saying, "But as for you, speak to the sons of Israel, saying, 'You shall surely observe My sabbaths; for this is a sign between Me and you throughout

your generations, that you may know that I am the Lord who sanctifies you. Therefore you are to observe the sabbath, for it is holy to you. Everyone who profanes it shall surely be put to death; for whoever does any work on it, that person shall be cut off from among his people. For six days work may be done, but on the seventh day there is a sabbath of complete rest, holy to the Lord; whoever does any work on the sabbath day shall surely be put to death. So the sons of Israel shall observe the sabbath, to celebrate the sabbath throughout their generations as a perpetual covenant.’ It is a sign between Me and the sons of Israel forever; for in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, but on the seventh day He ceased from labor, and was refreshed.”

Notice that this passage refers to the seventh day as the day of God's sabbath rest. But when you read Genesis 1, the seventh day is not a 24-hour period of time. It does not come to an end with the phrase “and there was evening and there was morning, the seventh day.” Rather, God is, in a sense, still in his day of sabbath rest. He is no longer creating. So if the seventh day, though referred to as “a day” and as the model for Israel’s sabbath day, isn't to be taken literally, then why should the other days before it be taken to be literal 24-hour periods of time because they serve as the model for workdays?

Those who hold to the literal interpretation will often say that when an ordinal number is used with the word *yom* (like “second day” or “third day” and so forth), then it always refers to a 24-hour period of time. But I don't find this a convincing argument at all. First of all, there's no grammatical rule in Hebrew that says when

yom is used with an ordinal number it must refer to a 24-hour period of time. If no such examples are to be found in Hebrew literature that we have, that could simply be accidental. It could simply be a reflection of the fact that our sources in Hebrew are relatively limited and there just isn't any occasion on which you have an expression like "second day" or "third day" being used in a metaphorical way. So it's not really a valid point grammatically speaking. It can simply be an accident of history or literature that we don't have passages where an ordinal number is used with *yom* to refer to something other than a 24-hour period of time.

Secondly, however, the claim is, in fact, just false anyway. We do have passages where *yom* is used with an ordinal number to refer to a non-literal day. Hosea 6:2 would be such an example. Hosea 6:2 says, "He will revive us after two days; He will raise us up on the third day, That we may live before Him." Here the days are clearly not 24-hour periods of time. Rather, the third day represents the time of God's restoration and healing of Israel after having wounded and rent Israel through his judgment. So it's simply false that *yom* is never used with an ordinal number to refer to a non-literal day. Hosea 6:2 clearly does.

But thirdly, I think that the claim here on the part of the literal interpreter is simply missing the point entirely. The point is that a 24-hour day can be used as a literary metaphor. Even if *yom* always means a 24-hour day, that doesn't even address the question of whether a 24-hour day couldn't be used metaphorically. Let me give an analogy. Take the English word "arm." Now, in English, the word "arm" has two senses. In one sense, it means a limb of the body attached to your shoulder with a hand on the end. This would

be your arm. But in another sense, the English word “arm” can mean a weapon. For example, we might refer to someone as “an armed man.” When we talk about an armed man, we don't mean a man who has limbs. We mean a man who's carrying a weapon. So the word “arm” in English can have these two different meanings. Now, very often the Scriptures will use the word “arm” in a metaphorical sense with respect to the Lord. For example, it will say something like this, *The arm of the Lord was with them*. When Scripture says, “the arm of the Lord,” it's clearly using the word to mean a limb. I'm not talking about the Lord's having a weapon. I'm using the word “arm” in the ordinary sense of an appendage or a limb. But that doesn't imply that it's to be taken literally when you apply it to God, implying that God has some sort of a humanoid body (as the Mormons do). Rather, it's a metaphor when it's applied to God. When the Scriptures say that the arm of the Lord was with the people of Israel, what it means is something like God's power was with them or he was strengthening them or God's favor was upon them with strength and might. If you could show that everywhere the word “arm” is used in Scripture, it means a limb, that wouldn't do anything to show that the word is not being used metaphorically. In exactly the same way, even if *yom* is always used in Scripture to mean a 24-hour day, that doesn't even begin to address the question of whether a 24-hour day might not be used metaphorically for something else. So I don't think that these arguments in favor of the literal interpretation are at all compelling.

On the other hand, there are indications in the text itself that six consecutive 24-hour days are not intended by the author. I want to emphasize: I'm saying this not on the basis of modern science, but

rather on the basis of the text itself, wholly in abstraction from what modern science might have to say.

For example, we've already referred to the fact that the phrase “and it was evening and it was morning” is not used with respect to the seventh day. That suggests that the seventh day is still ongoing. God is still in his day of sabbath rest. He is no longer creating new things. God is still resting from the work of creation. So if this seventh day can be more flexibly understood, then can the others be perhaps more flexibly understood as well?

Moreover, notice that throughout the first chapter of Genesis the evening is mentioned before the morning, as has already been said. The evening is part of the first day and then the morning is part of the following day, so that a day begins with the morning and ends at the morning of the next day. Moreover, the Hebrew words for “morning” and “evening” refer to sunrise and sunset. A problem that has bedeviled interpreters from earliest times is the fact that God doesn't make the sun until the fourth day. But if that's the case then how could the previous days have been 24-hour days marked by an evening and a morning if there wasn't any sun to create solar days? One young earth creationist whom I have read on this writes:

It is only in the last few centuries that astronomers have realized that a day/night cycle needs only light plus rotation. Having day and evening and morning without the sun would have been generally inconceivable to the ancients.

Now, he takes this as therefore indicative of divine revelation – God put something into Genesis 1 that the ancients themselves would never have realized and understood, that the Earth rotates on its axis. But, you see, that's concordism. That's to say that you

should read Genesis in light of modern astronomy, which teaches that the Earth rotates on its axis – something that the ancient author and audience would not have understood or said. I think it's better to just take this sequence non-literally – it's a figurative story that needn't be taken in a literal fashion.

Furthermore, the author describes processes that he must've known took longer than 24 hours as though they happened in a single day. For example, the draining of the primordial ocean covering the Earth on day 2 could not plausibly be thought to happen in 24 hours. Just compare what the same author says about how long it took for the flood of Noah to drain away until mountains became visible. “the waters receded from the earth continually. At the end of a hundred and fifty days the waters had abated and . . . the tops of the mountains were seen.” (Gen 8:3-5).

Or consider the creation of plant life on the third day. In Genesis 1:11-12 we read:

Then God said, “Let the earth sprout vegetation, plants yielding seed, and fruit trees on the earth bearing fruit after their kind with seed in them”; and it was so. The earth brought forth vegetation

Notice here it does not say that God said, *Let there be trees and plants bearing seed and bearing fruit*. Rather, he says, *Let the Earth bring forth these things*, and then the Earth brought forth vegetation, fruit trees, and so forth. We all know how long it takes, for example, for an apple tree to grow from a tiny sapling to a mature fruit-bearing tree which will blossom and bear apples. If the author were thinking here of a 24-hour period of time, he would have to be imagining something that would look like time-

lapse photography, where you would have the seed sprout and the little plant burst out of the ground and suddenly grow up into a tree, the blossoms would flower, and then the fruit would pop out on the tree. I simply can't persuade myself that that's what this ancient author of Genesis is imagining. It would be like a film being run on fast forward for the Earth to do this in a literal 24-hour day. I think it's very plausible to think that the author here is not imagining this happening in a literal 24-hour period of time.

Also notice that when God creates Adam and Eve in chap. 2, this process appears to involve more than a 24-hour period of time. The author describes Adam's activity on this day in naming all of the animals that God brings to him – the hundreds and thousands of animals that must have been known to ancient Israelites--getting acquainted with their habits, realizing that he is alone, that there is no mate fit for him among these animals, falling asleep, Eve's finally being created; and then when Eve at last comes and is presented before Adam, he exclaims, *This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh!* The word here “at last” indicates that some period of time has gone by. Elsewhere this phrase is used in the book of Genesis to indicate a long time of waiting. That would again suggest that the author didn't see his narrative as necessarily transpiring in a 24-hour period of time.

For these and other reasons, I think that one can quite legitimately approach Genesis 1-3 with greater flexibility than the literal interpretation would allow. This would imply that the creation account is not meant to be transpiring over six consecutive 24-hour days. Again, this isn't to say that a literal interpretation is illegitimate. It's a perfectly feasible interpretation of Genesis. But it

is to say that we shouldn't box ourselves in to thinking that this is the only legitimate interpretation. Young earth creationists who regard anybody who takes a non-literal view of these passages as somehow an unbiblical compromiser or courting heresy, I think, are simply mistaken and overly narrow. There are good indications in the text itself (wholly apart from considerations of modern science) that the text is not meant to be taken literally.

Historically, it's interesting that several of the church fathers and rabbis down through history did not take Genesis 1 to refer to six consecutive 24-hour days. People like St. Augustine and Origen and Justin Martyr and others of the church fathers took these not to be 24-hour periods of time. So there's always been among rabbis and Christian church fathers a range of interpretation. Some of them do take the passage literally, but others take it figuratively. It has never been a touchstone of orthodoxy to ask whether or not you believe that the world was created in six 24-hour days. So, although the literal interpretation is one legitimate interpretation, I don't think that it's the only one.