

## § 9. Excursus on Creation of Life and Biological Diversity

### Lecture 4

#### The Gap and Day-Gap Interpretations

Last time we looked at the literal interpretation of Genesis chapter 1. Today we want to turn to a quite different interpretation which has been called the “gap interpretation.” This is a view that was popularized by the old *Scofield Reference Bible*. It holds that there is a gap of time between verses 1 and 2 of Genesis chapter 1, and that all of the evidence of fossil life, extinct life forms, and so forth were from an ancient world that existed prior to the state described in Genesis 1:2 and which came under God's judgment and was destroyed. What is described in verses 2 and following then is God's re-creation (in effect) of the world after a long gap. So this view would say that all of the evidence that we have in contemporary science of ancient geological periods, prehistoric life, and the antiquity of life forms is from that pre-gap world.

What might we say by way of assessment of this theory? I think that there could well be a gap of time between verses 1 and 2 in Genesis chapter 1. Verse 1 describes, as we have seen, God's creation of the universe, or “the heavens and the Earth.” Then in verse 2 the focus radically narrows to God's activity upon the Earth – “and the Earth was without form and void” – and God's transformation of the Earth from an uninhabitable waste to a place which is fit for human habitation. So I think there could well be a gap of time between the creation of the universe in verse 1 and the transformation of the surface of the Earth into a biosphere suitable for human habitation.

Some young earth creationists, eager to maintain that God's creation of the universe in six consecutive 24-hour days, have insisted that there cannot be a gap between verses 1 and 2. Rather, God's creation of the heavens and the Earth in verse 1 must be comprised within the six days of creation. The issue that they are raising here is in effect: when did day 1 begin? Did day 1 begin with the creation of light in verse 3, or did day 1 begin with God's creation of the heavens and the Earth in verse 1? In support of the view that day 1 begins in verse 1 these interpreters appeal to the grammatical form of verse 2. They argue, as I have previously in our discussion of *creatio ex nihilo* that the first verse should not be thought of as a title for the entire creation account because it is linked to the second verse by the Hebrew word *vav* or “and” – “and the Earth was without form and void,” etc. So this is not simply a title but it is joined by this Hebrew conjunction to the second verse. But these scholars would point out that the grammatical structure of verse 2 is not the typical form in Hebrew of a sequential narrative which would be the conjunction *vav* plus a verb in the imperfect tense plus a subject of the sentence. This form is known as the “*vav*-consecutive,” and that is not the form that verse 2 takes grammatically. Rather, it is *vav* plus immediately the subject of the sentence – “and the Earth was without form and void” – followed by the verb in the perfect tense. So this is

not a *vav*-consecutive and therefore does not describe the state of affairs in verse 2 to follow chronologically on the state described in verse 1. These two states, then, are not temporally sequential, and therefore there cannot be a gap between them. Moreover these interpreters appeal once again to the Pentateuchal author's comment in Exodus 20:11, "In six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them." And Exodus 31:17, "for in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, and on the seventh day he rested." That comprises in the six days the events of Genesis 1:1 which says that in the beginning God created the heavens and the Earth. In [Exodus] 20:11 and 31:17 says, "in six days" the Lord made the heavens and the Earth. So the events of verse 1 must be included in day 1 since they are part of the six days of creation. So day 1 begins with God's creation of the heavens and the Earth in the beginning, and it ends with the morning of the second day.

I, myself, do not find these arguments convincing. I think that the most natural interpretation of the passage is that day 1 begins with God's creation of the light. Genesis 1:3-5 says,

And God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, one day.

What could be more obvious? The author says, "God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night." It seems to me that the most natural understanding of this is that this marks the creation of the first day.

Notice that when the author says "there was evening and there was morning, one day," the evening refers to the fading of the daylight that God had created, and the morning refers to the morning of the next day. The evening doesn't refer to the primordial darkness and the morning to the creation of daylight for then there would be no morning for the second day. Evening refers to the evening of or the ending of the day light of day 1, not to the primordial darkness. So day 1 begins with God's creation of light.

I think that support for this view comes from the pattern of the other five days. Each day is marked by the phrase "there was evening and there was morning" and then which day it is. Each day begins with a new morning after the evening of the previous day. There's no reason to make day 1 an exception to this pattern that is exhibited by all the other days.

As for the grammatical argument, it is correct that what follows chronologically on verse 1 is the state of affairs described in verse 3 – "and God said, 'Let there be light.'" What we have in verse 2 is a circumstantial clause giving background information to verse 3. This is called a "*vav*-disjunctive" construction. We can translate verse 2 as follows: *Now*

*the Earth was without form and void.* It is a circumstantial clause describing the situation that obtained when God in verse 3 began his creative work. I don't think there's anything that would preclude a gap of time between the state described in verse 1 and the beginning of God's activity described in verse 3 when he acts to bring about an end to the state of primordial darkness and desolation.

As for Exodus 20:11 and 31:17, I think that the six-day creationist is pressing these verses too hard to make them say things that were not in the mind of the author. The author is thinking back on Genesis chapter 1, and he's referring to these six creative days related there. I doubt that it even entered his mind as to whether the first day began with verse 1 or verse 3. His statement is just a sort of general summary statement that doesn't mean to address the question of when the first day began. Notice if we do press these verses with a wooden literalness then it actually backfires on the six-day creationist. Exodus 31:17 says, "in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day he rested." But in Genesis 1 on this interpretation God made the heavens and the earth in one day – the first day. God made the heavens and the Earth, according to Genesis 1:1, on what they would count is the first day. Now, that would be a ridiculously literal interpretation of Exodus 31:17. But if we interpret the verse in a more natural way then when day 1 began just doesn't come into view. It's not the author's interest. So it seems to me that there could well have been a gap of time between Genesis 1:1 and Genesis 1:3.

Having said that, however, the idea that there was a prior life world before God's creative activity in verse 3 is utterly foreign to the text. The text to all appearances is describing God's initial creation of the biosphere, and on each occasion it pronounces the goodness of God's creative work. The idea that this is just all a repeat of something that's gone on before has absolutely no warrant in the text. Remember, this is supposed to be a pre-flood recreation. This isn't a recreation of the world after the flood. This is prior to Noah, and there's simply nothing in the text that would support a view like the gap theory.

Indeed, the gap interpretation seems to be an example of concordism at its very worst. Under the pressure of the existence of prehistoric life and a geological time and the vast age of the universe, one reads things into the text like a prior world and a gap that were not at all intended by the author. So this is guilty, I think, of this flawed hermeneutic in terms of how we interpret Genesis 1.

## **START DISCUSSION**

*Student:* I want to use a different perspective to look at the seven days of creation. We all kind of look at it in time, but what if we just take the time away and God's creation actually is in classification or put in the boundary into the first day, light and darkness, the second day, water above and water below, the third day sea and the land, the fourth day is the boundary of the time where he set the rhythm of year and season. So the fifth

day is a boundary of species in the ocean and in the sky. The sixth day is boundary of species on the land. And the last is boundary of male and female . . . in their proper course.

*Dr. Craig:* All right. Very good. You have anticipated one of the later interpretations that we're going to talk about in this class. Those who champion what is often called a literary framework view will take the view that the chronology of the story is not meant to be taken seriously or literally; this is a literary structuring of creation. You've specified it in terms of boundaries; others will say it's a classification in terms of spaces and then the things that populate those spaces, but this isn't meant to be interpreted chronologically. I want to put that off until we get to it because we will be talking about it. But the view that you are expressing is not unusual or aberrant. It is one that is very much in the conversation today. So we'll come back to that.

*Student:* I was wondering if you are familiar with John Sailhamer's take on the gap theory – that the gap is not in between verses 1 and 2 but it's actually found in the word “in the beginning.” That the word “beginning” itself means a block of time as opposed to a moment of time.

*Dr. Craig:* You've expressed it very well. John Sailhamer was my colleague at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in the Old Testament Department. His contention is that the word in Genesis 1:1 “in the beginning” refers to a period of time, not to an instant of time. It would be much as if we would say something like “in the beginning of the Trump administration, the mandate in Obamacare was repealed by Congress.” There the word “beginning” doesn't mean the first instant of the Trump administration. I'm not persuaded by Sailhamer's arguments that it has to be that way. I think that he's right that the word “beginning” is flexible and could refer to, for example, the first year of a king's reign or something of that sort. But I don't see any reason that the word “beginning” can't be shrunk down to refer to say the first second if you wanted to. It's an indeterminate amount of time. He admits that. So there's no basis for saying that this beginning means a sort of long period. It seems to me the beginning could be the first moment of creation at which God created the heavens and the Earth. So I'm not persuaded that Sailhamer has shown that the word “beginning” has to refer to a long protracted interval of time even if it does refer to an interval rather than an instant.

*Student:* In my own study of the word I seem to come to the opposite conclusion that the word does always refer to the first part of the whole of something in comparison to its length. So it's even referred to as “bring the first fruits of your” . . . it's like the tithe.

*Dr. Craig:* That would be analogous to my Trump illustration where the beginning of the Trump administration refers to something like his first year or the first several months, but it's not the whole tenure. That would be in line with what you're saying – “beginning”

could specify an indeterminate interval of time that is near the front end – the earliest part of some longer duration.

*Student:* He gives a good illustration in Jeremiah 28:1 which says, *In the beginning of the reign of King Zedekiah in the fourth year in the fifth month.* And Zedekiah's reign is 11 years long, so four years and five months into his reign is still considered the beginning. It is the same exact construction in the Hebrew “in the beginning” there.

*Dr. Craig:* Yes, you are making the same point that I was. Very good.

*Student:* I just want to know what verse you were referring to in Exodus.

*Dr. Craig:* There were two verses. 20:11 and 31:17.

## **END DISCUSSION**

Let's go on to the next interpretation which is the day-gap interpretation. The first one is the gap interpretation; now we want to look at the day-gap interpretation. The day-gap interpretation holds that what we have described in Genesis 1 is six 24-hour *non-consecutive* days. There are long gaps of time in between God's creative acts. So, on day 1 God miraculously creates, for example, the land. And then there's a long period of time during which things might evolve. And then he begins to bring into existence various life forms and allows them to evolve. And then he intervenes again on another creative day and miraculously creates, for example, land animals and allows them to propagate for a long period of time before he intervenes again and creates humanity. So you have six 24-hour days, but these days are separated by long intervals of time during which time the things that God has created may develop and evolve.

What might we say by way of assessment of this interpretation? Again, I think one has to say that there's nothing in the text that would suggest the day-gap interpretation. On the contrary, each morning is the morning of the consecutive day. Each day ends with the evening and then the morning of the following day is when the new day begins. Given that we're talking about the evening of a day and then the morning of the next day, there isn't any room for a gap. One day follows immediately upon the heels of the other. So I don't think that there's anything in the text that would indicate that there are gaps of time between these six days. Indeed, that seems to be ruled out by the pattern of evening and morning.

The motivation behind this view seems to be once again a desire to reconcile the text with geological time and limited evolutionary development of life forms by reading gaps into the text in order to extend the past and allow for limited evolution during the gaps. Insofar as this view tends to be motivated by an attempt to reconcile Genesis 1 with modern science, it again represents the flawed hermeneutic of concordism once again.

Ironically, it doesn't even do a very good job at that! Because modern science indicates that the animals, for example, were not created in just a 24-hour period of time, but rather over millions of years. The idea that all aquatic life, for example, was created in 24 hours and that there was then a period of non-creative development and then another 24 hour period millions of years later when all terrestrial life was created just flies in the face of the fossil record. So insofar as the day-gap interpretation is an attempt motivated by the desire to find concord with modern science, it really doesn't do a very good job.

But all of that is beside the point anyway because at this stage you'll remember we're not asking about what the right scientific view is of the origin of life or biological complexity. We're simply asking the hermeneutical question: what does this ancient text teach? The day-gap interpretation doesn't really find any support in the text. There isn't a clue that this ancient text is intended to teach that there were long gaps of time in between the days. Indeed, quite the contrary. This is a view that's read into the text, and I think even contrary to the text because of its pattern of "evening and morning, one day."

### **START DISCUSSION**

*Student:* I think those that might support the view, which would include John Lennox in his book *Seven Days That Divide the World*, he tended towards this view.

*Dr. Craig:* So is Lennox not what I would call a day-age theorist? That the days represent long ages of time?

*Student:* It's hard to find in that little book that he wrote, but towards the end he leans towards the intermittent days view, what I call it. What he would say is that the fulfillment of what God said was not done in the 24 hours but was done during the gap of time in between.

*Dr. Craig:* OK. I think that's a quite different view than the one that we're thinking of here. The view that is suggested here seems to be that we have six days of revelation (or divine declaration) but not necessarily, as you say, the fulfillment of that declaration or revelation on that 24-hour period. That would be yet a different view that we'll have to talk about later.

*Student:* I like to treat this subject kind of positively. My comment is if you look at when God told Moses to tell the Hebrews that he was taking them out of Egypt, they tended (after the first few plagues) to doubt that, and they got very (as my Bible says) dispirited because it didn't happen right away. Is it possible that God said, *Let there be light*, and there was light not instantaneously but at some point after that? Would that fit in with the linguistics?

*Dr. Craig:* With that specific example, I don't think it would work because, again, the text says, *God said, "Let there be light," and there was light, and he called the light Day.*

There just doesn't seem to be any reason to think that there was a long period of time. That comes close to the view that was just expressed here that God said, *Let the Earth bring forth vegetation, fruit trees bearing seed after their kind, and fruit after their kind* – one could well imagine that that might take place over a long period of time in accordance with what you've suggested.

I hope that you're not dispirited by what I've been sharing here! I want to give a survey of different interpretations, but that doesn't mean they're all good or unsusceptible to criticism. Too often in the church we have Bible studies where people are just supposed to share how they understand or what does it mean to them and it's all subjective and there's no attempt to give any objective assessment of the views. I think we can do better than that. I think some interpretations are less plausible than others and open to criticism. But there shouldn't be dispiriting. I hope that it will increase your interest in the text and in understanding it.

*Student:* Just to finish up on what you said. I have so many things in the Bible that I've read and that I don't understand. I always put them up on the shelf in my “This I don't understand” library which is absolutely full of things up on the shelf that I don't understand because I'm not God.

*Dr. Craig:* I've got a shelf like that, too! I think that every thinking Christian will have those questions on the shelf.

**END DISCUSSION<sup>1</sup>**

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<sup>1</sup>Total Running Time: 29:20 (Copyright © 2019 William Lane Craig)