
The Book of Beginnings – Studies in Genesis

LESSON V : GENESIS I – HOW ARE WE TO UNDERSTAND ‘DAYS’?

“The work of the first day of creation confronts us with the major difference between biblical Christianity and secular Naturalism: absolute creation out of nothing by an infinite, personal God, as opposed to the eternity of matter or energy. Probably the second major unbridgeable gap between the biblical picture of reality and that of humanist philosophy is the question of time and, specifically, the age of the cosmos. Vast ages are necessary to make viable the secularist, impersonal alternative to divine creation: the theory of evolution. Owing to the intellectual shift by the early nineteenth century to the assumption of vast ages of the earth, first in geology, and then in biology, and soon in history and every other field, those who took the Scriptures seriously faces difficult questions in interpreting the days of creation week. Hence from the early or mid-nineteenth century onwards, there have been a variety of interpretations of ‘day’ among even conservative Bible commentators.” [Kelly, 149f]

HOW WAS THE HEBREW WORD ‘DAY’ USED IN THE OT — The typical usages of the word ‘day’ (Hebrew, *yôm*) signifies either a twenty-four hour solar day or the daylight portion of those hours. There are a few exceptions to that generality; for example, sometimes ‘day’ is used in Scripture to indicate **a general period of time not precisely defined**; for example:

‘I loathe my life; I would not live forever. Let me alone, for my days are but a breath.’ (Job 7:16)

‘For all our days have passed away in Your wrath; we finish our years like a sigh.’ (Psalm 90:9)

But in such cases ‘day’ still means a finite succession of normal days, not by any stretch of the imagination vast ages.

Sometimes ‘day’ is used in Scripture to refer to **a portion of the year**; for example:

‘Now Reuben went in the days of wheat harvest and found mandrakes in the field, and brought them to his mother Leah.’ (Gen 30:14)

But as above ‘day’ still refers to a limited duration of normal solar days; in the case above of nothing other than a few weeks time, not thousands or millions of years.

Sometimes ‘day’ is used in Scripture as **a prophetic expression**; for example:

‘In that day the Branch of the Lord shall be beautiful and glorious; and the fruit of the earth shall be excellent and appealing for those of Israel who have escaped.’ (Isa 4:2)

‘For this is the day of the Lord God of hosts, a day of vengeance, that He may avenge Himself on His adversaries.’ (Jer 46:10)

‘You have not gone up into the gaps to build a wall for the house of Israel to stand in battle on the day of the Lord.’ (Ezek 13:5)

‘Blow the trumpet in Zion, and sound an alarm in My holy mountain! Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble; for the day of the Lord is coming, for it is at hand: a day of darkness and gloominess, a day of clouds and thick darkness...’ (Joel 2:1,2)

‘Woe to you who desire the day of the Lord! For what good is the day of the Lord to you? It will be darkness, and not light.’ (Amos 5:18)

But in such usages it is obviously a very special kind of day and whatever its prophetic significance, the word is used to mean an ordinary day (or short period of time) which becomes extra-ordinary because of God’s final intervention. In no sense can it be used to mean vast ages, nor does it contradict the general biblical usage of ‘day’ as a normal solar day.

A few instances ‘day’ is used in Scripture to mean **something other than a normal twenty-four hours**; for example:

‘For a thousand years in Your sight are like yesterday when it is past, and like a watch in the night.’ (Psalm 90:4)

‘But, beloved, do not forget this one thing, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day.’ (2 Pet 3:8)

But in these instances context clearly indicates this does not have the normal, historico-literal significance it usually has. This kind of exceptional usage cannot legitimately be read back into a normal sequence of days (as though, for example, 2 Pet 3:8 could be read back into Genesis 1 to mean creation took seven thousand years).

REASONS TO ACCEPT ‘DAY’ IN GENESIS 1,2 AS TWENTY-FOUR HOUR PERIOD OF TIME

The following are reasons to accept ‘day’ in the creation story as a normal twenty-four hour period of time:

- ***The semantic constraints of the singular yôm.*** — *Yôm* always refers to a normal literal day when used as a singular noun and is not part of a compound grammatical construction (e.g., ‘*the day of the Lord*’ or with the noun *yôm* being used with a preposition immediately attached to it). The noun *yôm* is used in the Hebrew OT 2,304 times; of these it is used in the singular 1,452 times. It is used in the Pentateuch 668 times, 425 of which is in the singular. In Genesis it is used 152 times, 83 of which is in the singular. In Gen 1:1-2:3 *yôm* is used 14 times, 13 in the singular and once in the plural (Gen 1:14). So throughout the entire OT the meaning of *yôm* is consistent. The burden of proof lies with those who reject this typical rendering; indeed, if it were not for the pressures of our secular culture, no one would seek another interpretation. ***Anyone reading Genesis 1 without prejudice would understand Moses to be speaking of a normal, seven-day week.*** [grammatical details from Robert V. McCabe, *Defending the Foundation of the Gospel: Literal Days in the Creation Week*; Mid-America Conference on Preaching; Oct 2006; updated Feb 2014]

- ***On the first day of creation is our very first usage of the word ‘day’ (yôm) and the Lord is very careful to define the word for us*** —

‘Then God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light. And God saw the light, that it was good; and God divided the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness He called Night. So the evening and the morning were the first day.’ (Gen 1:3-5)

As though in anticipation of future misunderstandings, God defined the very first usage of the word ‘day’ as the ‘light’ to distinguish it from the ‘darkness’ which He called ‘night.’ The only interpretation possible is the twenty-four hour period of time with which we are all so familiar.

● **The repeated formula ‘the evening and the morning were the ____ day’ speaks to the ‘day’ being a normal twenty-four hour period of time.** — The use of waw consecutive with each clause of the six days containing evening (‘and there was evening’) and morning (‘and there was morning’) indicates that at the conclusion of a creation day, the next sequence was evening and this was followed by the next significant sequence, morning. The duration of each of these days were the same. It is clear that from the first day and continuing thereafter, there was established a cyclical succession of days and nights – periods of light and periods of darkness. Whenever ‘evening’ and ‘morning’ are used together in a context with ‘day’ (19 times beyond the 6 uses in Genesis 1) or they are used without ‘day’ (38 times), they are used consistently in reference to literal days. ‘Evening’ and ‘morning’ have at times been taken as a reference to the entire 24-hour day. With this understanding, ‘evening’ is used to represent the entire nighttime portion of a literal day, and ‘morning’ to stand for the entire daytime segment of a day. ‘Evening’ and ‘morning’ are used in similar ways in other passages of the Pentateuch. One example is found in Exodus 27:21 where Moses instructed Aaron and his sons to keep the lamps in the Tabernacle burning all night until they were extinguished in the morning:

“In the tent of meeting, outside the veil which is before the testimony, Aaron and his sons shall keep it in order from evening to morning before the LORD; it shall be a perpetual statute throughout their generations for the sons of Israel.”

“Such a cyclical light-dark arrangement clearly means that the earth was now rotating on its axis and that there was a source of light on one side of the earth corresponding to the sun, even though the sun was not yet made (Genesis 1:16). It is equally clear that the length of such days could only have been that of a normal solar day.” [Morris, 55] “But if the days of creation are regulated by the recurring interchange of light and darkness, they must be regarded not as periods of time of incalculable duration, of years or thousands of years, but as simply earthly days.” [Keil, 51]

● **When modified by a number or ordinal (as ‘Day One’ or ‘Day Two’) it universally means a normal solar day in the OT Scriptures.** — The formula in Genesis 1 may be rendered literally: ‘And there was evening, then morning – day one,’ and so on. “When the word yôm, ‘day,’ is employed together with a numeral, which happens 150 times in the Old Testament, it refers in the Old Testament invariably to a literal day of 24 hours.” [Hasel, Gerhard F. “The ‘Days’ of Creation in Genesis 1.” *Origins* 21 (1994): 5–38; pp. 23-26] Other such examples are Leviticus 12:3 and Numbers 7 when the leaders from each tribe bringing various gifts to the Lord on twelve, sequential, literal days. (e.g., Num 7:12). “Thus each ‘day’ had distinct boundaries and was one in a series of days, both of which criteria are never present in the Old Testament writings unless literal days are intended. The writer of Genesis was trying to guard in every way possible against any of his readers deriving the notion of nonliteral days from his record.” [Morris, 56] Writing on the days of creation in Genesis 1, Derek Kidner says the following: “Yet to the present writer the march of the days is too majestic a progress to carry no implication of ordered sequence; it also seems over-subtle to adopt a view of the passage which discounts one of the primary impressions it makes on the ordinary reader.” [Kidner, 54f]

● **The fourth commandment confirms twenty-four hour creation days.** — When the Lord gave Moses the Ten Commandments, He annexed the reason for the fourth commandment (‘Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.’ – Exodus 20:8) as follows:

‘For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it.’

(Exodus 20:11; see also 31:17; Deut 5:12-15)

There would be no reader of this commandment that could misunderstand the Lord to be referring to endless ages instead of our normal week of seven days. Any attempt to misread the clear statement of Moses is to intentionally read-in to the text a teaching foreign to the clear rendering.

● ***The sequence of events in the creation week also demands a literal day.*** — On the third day of creation, God created vegetation with fruit trees and seed-bearing plants (Gen 1:11–12). Much vegetation needs insects for pollination. Insects were not created until the sixth day (vv. 24–25). If the survival of those types of plants which needed insects for pollination depended on them to generate seeds and to perpetuate themselves, then there would be a serious problem should the creation ‘day’ consist of long ages or aeons. The type of plant life dependent on this type of pollination process without the presence of insects could not have survived for these long periods of time, if ‘day’ were to mean ‘age’ or ‘aeons.’

● ***Moses was writing in polemic fashion against the current pagan myths.*** — As mentioned in a previous lesson, part of Moses’ intent was to correct the various pagan teachings with which he was surrounded. Some of those pagan errors included various theories of evolution (*‘there is nothing new under the sun’* – our modern evolution teaching is not *‘man advancing in science’* but rather man’s return to paganism!). Writing on the ‘days’ of creation, Henry Morris says this:

“In fact, it was necessary for him to be completely explicit on this point [of the ‘day’ being a twenty-four hour period], since all the pagan nations of antiquity believed in some form of evolutionary cosmogony which entailed vast aeons of time before man and other living creatures developed from the primeval chaos.” [Morris, 56]

Granted, the ancient myths of creation involved a variety of gods and demigods but they believed in the great past ages as much as our modern pagan scientists. So Moses wrote as clearly as he possibly could to avoid any misinterpretations.

● ***To accept a day-age type of theory, we must allow science to interpret Scripture rather than letting Scripture interpret itself.*** — One leading (liberal) Hebrew scholar James Barr, Professor of Hebrew Bible at Vanderbilt University and former Regius Professor of Hebrew at Oxford University in England, was written a personal letter dated April 23, 1984, about the literal interpretation of the early chapters of Genesis. In response to this letter, Barr stated the issue like this:

“Probably, so far as I know, there is no professor of Hebrew or Old Testament at any world-class university who does not believe that the writer(s) of Genesis 1-11 intended to convey to their readers the ideas that (a) creation took place in a series of six days which were the same as the days of 24 hours we now experience; ... Or, to put it negatively, the apologetic arguments which suppose the ‘days’ of creation to be long eras of time, the figures of years not to be chronological, and the flood to be a merely local Mesopotamian flood, are not taken seriously by any such professors, as far as I know.” [cited by Ken Ham, *“The Lie”* and Henry Morris, *“The Literal Week of Creation”*]

It should be noted that the Hebrew or Old Testament scholars, the professors at ‘any world-class university,’ that Barr refers to almost universally, do not accept the truth claims of Scripture. What Barr asserts is that the plain meaning of the text is clearly recognized by this group of scholars. ***If this group of scholars who are not friends to orthodox Christianity can recognize the meaning***

of the text, how can compromising evangelicals who claim to accept the authority of Scripture distort the clear meaning of the Mosaic material by defending old earth models of creation?

“It is difficult to escape the impression that some of those who espouse a non-chronological view of the days of Genesis are moved by a desire to escape the difficulties which exist between Genesis and the so-called ‘findings’ of science. That such difficulties do exist cannot be denied, and their presence is a concern to every devout and thoughtful student of the Bible.... It certainly cannot be expected of any mere man that he possess sufficient knowledge to state accurately the full relationship between Genesis and the study of God’s created phenomena, let alone that he be expected to resolve whatever difficulties may appear. A truly humble student will acknowledge his ignorance and will make it his aim to be faithful to the holy and infallible words of Scripture.... Whenever ‘science’ and the Bible are in conflict, it is always the Bible that, in one manner or another, must give way. We are not told that ‘science’ should correct its answers in the light of Scripture. Always it is the other way round. Yet this is really surprising, for the answers which scientists have provided have frequently changed with the passing of time.” [Young, 51ff]

“I wish to make it plain that I am no foe of science, but I believe that the facts of the created universe, when rightly interpreted, will prove to be in harmony with the revelation which God has given us in the first chapter of Genesis.” [Young, preface]

THE QUESTION IS NOT ‘DID THE LORD CREATE IN SIX DAYS?’ BUT ‘WHY DID THE LORD TAKE SIX DAYS TO CREATE?’ — For any who accepts the Scriptures as the inspired, accurate, infallible record given to us by an omnipotent, omniscient Being Who loves His created beings — we have no problem accepting the truth of creation *ex nihilo*. For such a God to create this wonderful universe for His glory and for the good of His creation (especially thinking of mankind) is easily accepted, and we honor our God for being such an incredible God! ***Could God have created the universe in six days? Without question! – but that begs the question, why six days?*** Douglas Kelly makes a good observation in his book ‘*Creation and Change*’ worth noting. Commenting on the fourth commandment, Kelly says this:

“The crucial point here is that God’s creative work, followed by rest, forms the pattern of wholesome life for His image-bearer, mankind. Apparently, mankind is so important to the infinite God that He arranged His creative activity specifically to set the structure for human life. That must be a major reason why God created over six days rather than in a split-second (or a hundred billion years). Such a conclusion is far from preposterous once we take seriously the incarnation of the eternal Son of God as a true human in order to redeem humanity. If the infinite God condescended to take on our flesh in the person of His Son, His having organized the time series of creation week around the interests of the human race (the future bride of the Son of God) is – though wonderful to contemplate – not inconsistent with such covenant love and condescension. Indeed, the incarnation of the Agent of creation within the finite time series (without Himself ceasing to be infinite) seems a much more amazing miracle than the creation itself.” [Kelly, 152f]

APPENDIX — POSSIBLE EXCEPTION TO ENUMERATED DAYS? — While it is universally accepted in the OT that the usage of ‘day’ (*yôm*) with a numeric prefix refers to a twenty-four hour period, there may be an exception:

‘After two days He will revive us; on the third day He will raise us up, that we may live in His sight.’ (Hosea 6:2)

There are those who do not accept this as a clear exemption though, because this is prophetic and it is not absolutely certain what the prophecy means. Does it refer to the restoration of Israel to the land? Does it refer to the resurrection of Christ, and thus, that of His people in Him? We are therefore in no position to deny a sequence of three normal days. At the very least, such a reference is far too weak to disestablish the universal Scriptural usage of ordinals connected with days to mean ordinary solar days.