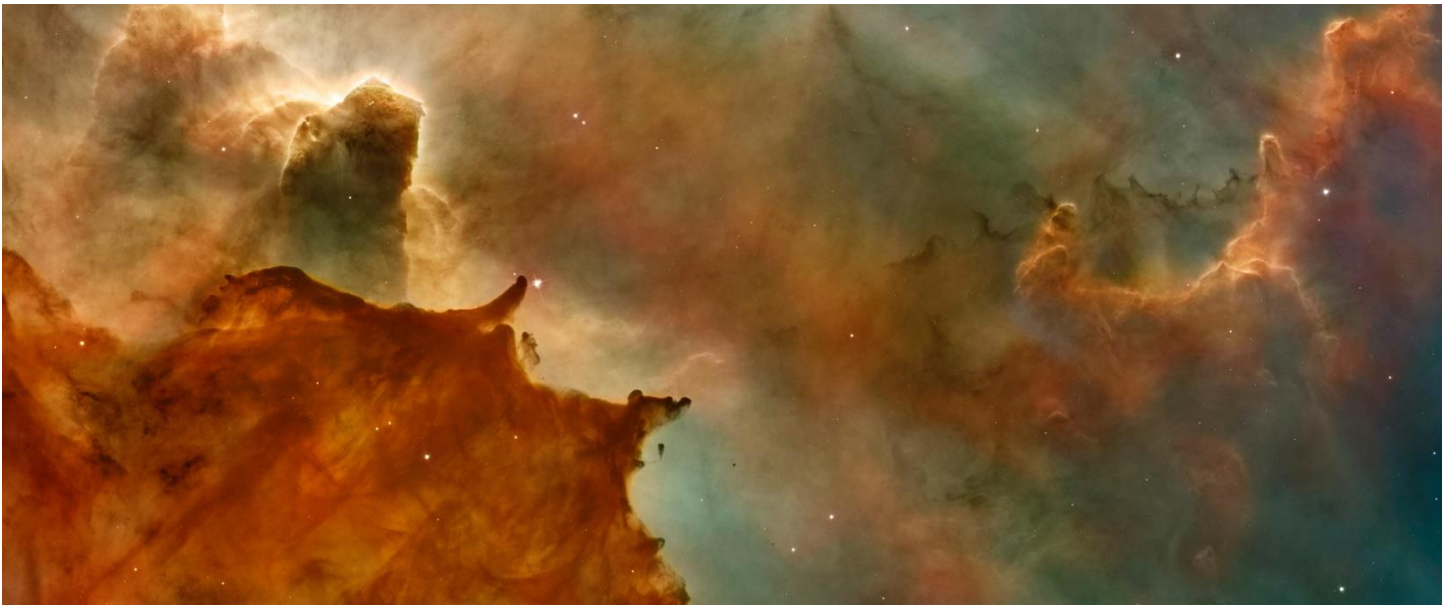


How long are the days of Genesis 1?



By **BioLogos Editorial Staff**, last updated on December 16, 2019

Introduction

Did the author of Genesis 1 intend to communicate that God created everything in six 24-hour days, or are the days meant to be understood in some other way?

The question of how to interpret the “days” in Genesis 1 has been debated for hundreds of years within the Christian church. The early chapters of Genesis were explored for their theological message (and not for scientific claims) by many notable Christian thinkers long before scientific evidence for the great age of the universe began to accumulate. The diversity and sophistication of pre-modern views of Genesis reminds us that the best interpretation is not obviously six 24-hour days.

Despite disagreements, all Christians believe Genesis 1 teaches that the one true God created all things and called his creation good. BioLogos affirms that Genesis, like the rest of the Bible, is the inspired and authoritative word of God. Based on a close examination of the biblical text and the cultural context in which Genesis was written, we favor a *literary* view over a calendar day or day-age view: the seven-day pattern is a literary device that serves the theological purposes of the author, rather than revealing information about the chronology of natural history.

Contrasting Views of Genesis 1

Most Christians today interpret the first creation account in the Bible, Genesis 1-2:3, in one of three ways:

1. According to the **calendar day view**, Genesis 1 is a straightforward historical narrative, in the modern journalistic sense. The repeating formula “there was evening, and there was morning – the first day,” and so on for six days (see 1:5, 8, 13, 19, 23, and 31) – refers to six 24-hour periods. This conclusion, combined with a summation of years given in biblical genealogies, lead most advocates of this view to believe that

God created the material universe in one ordinary week between six and ten thousand years ago. Those who hold this view are known as young-earth creationists.

2. By contrast, those who hold to the **day-age view** argue that each “day” in Genesis 1 represents an extended period of time. The days of Genesis 1 may be millions of years long and even overlap with one another. Advocates of this view tend to accept the scientific evidence for the great age of the universe; they are called old-earth or progressive creationists.
3. Others prefer a **literary view** (not to be confused with “literal,” though that word, in its technical sense, is the origin of “literary”). Literary views prioritize the literary features, theological themes, and cultural context of the creation account.

According to one literary approach, the framework view, the author of Genesis 1 uses the regular week – six days of work and then a Sabbath rest – as a framework to describe God’s work of creation. The first three days describe the creation of *realms* of habitation, while the second three creation days describe the *inhabitants* of those realms. For example, darkness and light are separated on the first day, but the sun, moon and stars are not created until the fourth day. As the foundation for days 4-6 is laid on days 1-3, we see God’s design of the cosmos (see Table).

Table 1: Outline of Genesis 1

Problem (vs. 2)	Preparation (days 1-3)	Population (days 4-6)
Darkness	1a Creation of light(Day) b Separation from Darkness (Night)	4a Creation of Sun b Creation of Moon, Stars
Watery Abyss	2a Creation of Firmament b Separation of Waters above from Waters below	5a Creation of Birds b Creation of Fish
Formless Earth	3a Separation of Earth from Sea b Creation of Vegetation	6a Creation of Land Animals b Creation of Humans

Credit: Conrad Hyers/PSCF. Used by permission.

The **analogical day view** is another literary approach. As “analogical” implies, the author is using the regular work week as an analogy to the creation week and is not intending to teach that God actually created everything in a six day period.

In another literary approach, the **cosmic temple view**, the seven days of Genesis 1 point back to the ancient practice of temple dedication. In the ancient Near East (ANE), temples were typically dedicated in a seven-day ceremony with the god coming to “rest” in his temple once it was complete and his image was installed. Not only are sevens pervasively associated with the tabernacle and temple in the Old Testament, but humans are the authorized image in God’s temple-cosmos. God’s rest on the seventh day could refer to his royal dwelling in, and rule over, the world he made, especially through human beings, to whom he delegated authority over the earth (Gen 1:26-28).

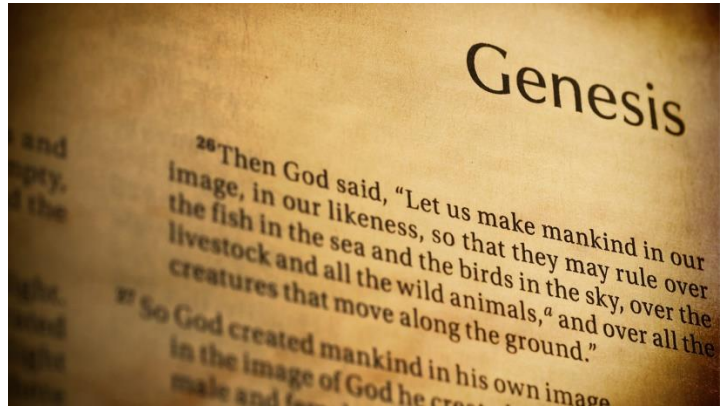
Literary approaches to the days of Genesis 1 are preferred by evolutionary creationists – like those in the BioLogos community – as well as some notable scholars who oppose, or are unsure about, evolution.

Many variations of the calendar day, day-age, and literary views exist, and scholars classify them in different ways. Yet all Christians affirm God’s ultimate sovereignty, the goodness of creation, and the honored status of people as his unique image bearers.

Textual Clues as to the Purpose of Genesis 1

The biblical text itself is the ultimate guide to the best interpretation of Genesis 1. Many of the clues we find in the text point to literary views.

Proponents of the day-age view note that the Hebrew word for day (*yom*) is sometimes used in Scripture for periods longer than a day. However, the uses that are often cited (e.g., Gen 2:4; Lev 14:2) are actually in a prepositional phrase (*beyom*; lit. “in the day”), which has the sense of “when,” or in certain fixed expressions like the “day of the Lord.” The presence of “evening and morning” with the first six days also makes it unlikely that the biblical author had in mind long periods of time.



Another essential clue about the purposes of Genesis 1 is its juxtaposition to a second creation account beginning in Genesis 2:4. Each account offers a different creation sequence and a different focus (see table).

	Genesis 1:1–2:3	Genesis 2:4b–25
Duration of Creation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • six days 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • one day implied (<i>bēyôm</i>, 2:4b)
Primordial Scenario	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • dark, watery chaos 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • desert-like oasis
Sequence of Creation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • light (nonsolar) • sky-dome (solid) • dry land • plants • lights set in the sky-dome • sea and sky creatures • land animals • humans 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • man • garden with trees and river • land animals and birds • woman
Method of Creation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • God speaks, separates, names, and blesses 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yahweh God forms, breathes, plants, puts to sleep, builds
Portrait of God	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • transcendent • sovereign over creation • some anthropomorphism 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • immanent • actively involved in creation • lots of anthropomorphism
Portrait of Humanity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • unspecified number of males and females created simultaneously • royals created in divine image, given dominion over the earth 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • one <i>'ādām</i> from the <i>'ādāmāh</i>; then one woman (<i>iššāh</i>) from the man (<i>iš</i>) in two separate acts • servants made caretakers of a garden

Credit: Daniel Harlow/PSCF. Used by permission.

A common approach to this problem has been to squeeze the events of Genesis 2 into the sixth day of Genesis 1, but the numerous differences between the two accounts (see chart) have convinced many biblical scholars that they are not meant to be seamlessly intertwined in one account. Instead, Genesis 1:1-2:3 is better understood as a prologue to the rest of Genesis. According to biblical scholar J. Richard Middleton,

In Genesis 1 we find God calling the cosmos (heaven and earth, and all that is in them) into existence. Then in the rest of Genesis (beginning in Genesis 2) we have the account of what came of (or developed out of) God's initial creation, how humans responded to God's call to be his image in the world.

These textual insights point to a remarkable literary depth in the early chapters of Genesis. What may seem like two disjointed creation narratives turns out to be a strategic arrangement serving the book as a whole.

The fact that God inspired the text in such a way that these two distinct creation accounts appear side by side strongly indicates that the chronology of creation is not the main focus of these texts. Together, they give us a fuller theological picture of God's work in creation.

Cultural Context Further Reveals Purpose

In addition to the text itself, the ancient cultural context is helpful in understanding the author's intended meaning. Over the past century, biblical scholars have made significant advances in understanding ANE culture, the context in which Genesis was written. Babylonian and Egyptian creation stories predating Genesis have been discovered that suggest that Genesis was written as a response to polytheism. Countering a culture in which celestial bodies were worshiped by earth dwellers, Genesis describes their purpose in terms of providing service (light and calendrical time) to earth dwellers.



Upper part of a clay tablet, part of the Creation legend Enuma elish. (Image Credit: Library of Ashurbanipal)

In the Babylonian creation story *Enuma Elish*, the storm-god Marduk forms heaven and earth from the body of the goddess Tiamat, whom he has just vanquished in battle; by contrast in Genesis, there is one God, and creation is an act of generosity and love, bringing into being a good world in which humans and other creatures can flourish. Whereas Marduk creates humans out of the blood of Tiamat's consort in order to serve the gods, the God of Genesis creates humans in a peaceful fashion and bestows on them his own image, delegating to them the high task of ruling the earth as his representatives.

Genesis therefore reveals God's distinctive character and creative activity in part by countering the stories that already existed in people's minds at the time.

God chose to reveal himself to a particular people with a particular conception of the world. It is evident in the biblical text that he was not interested in correcting pre-scientific ideas the Israelites shared with other ANE peoples. For example, they may have understood the waters of the heavens to be held back by a solid dome – the so-called firmament described in Genesis 1:6-8. The stars (and possibly the sun and moon) were believed to be embedded in the dome, and the earth was thought to be flat, with water all around (both above the firmament and below the earth). All ANE people shared this general two-tiered cosmology of heaven and earth and Genesis takes this view of the world for granted.

Does the fact that Scripture uses pre-scientific ways of describing the world invalidate its message? No. Christians have long noted that God revealed himself to the biblical writers in ways they could understand, a principle known as accommodation. As John Calvin wrote,

For who even of slight intelligence does not understand that, as nurses commonly do with infants, God is wont in a measure to “lisp” in speaking to us? Thus such forms of speaking do not so much express clearly what God is like as accommodate the knowledge of him to our slight capacity. To do this he must descend far beneath his loftiness. (Institutes of the Christian Religion, 1.13.1)

St. Augustine, one of the most important theologians in the history of the church, was famously disturbed by the “human-like” way in which God’s creation is portrayed in Genesis 1. For him, it was difficult to understand why an infinite God would take a whole week to create the cosmos. He concluded that God created instantaneously, but with the capacity to develop, much like a seed has the capacity to develop into a mature tree. In his view creation was simply *portrayed* in Genesis 1 as happening over a week’s time to accommodate human understanding. While Augustine’s instantaneous creation view has few modern adherents, he grasped a vital truth about Genesis 1: that the seven-day divine work week is not meant to limit God’s creative action but to present it in a way the original hearers would have understood.

Conclusion

So are the days of Genesis 1 meant to be understood as regular, 24-hour days? Yes and no. The seven-day week is meant to be understood as a regular human work week. But it does not automatically follow that Genesis 1 is revealing scientific information about the chronology of natural history. The frequent references to ancient cosmology in Genesis 1 indicate that God did not choose to reveal modern scientific information to the ancient Hebrews.

About BioLogos

Are science and religion at war? Many people today believe they are in conflict. BioLogos exists to show that you don’t have to choose between modern science and biblical faith. Our website offers hundreds of articles, profiles, videos, and curricula, and our speakers appear at dozens of universities, churches, and conferences around the country.

Our Mission

BioLogos invites the church and the world to see the harmony between science and biblical faith as we present an evolutionary understanding of God’s creation.

Core Commitments

We embrace the historical Christian faith, upholding the authority and inspiration of the Bible.

We affirm evolutionary creation, recognizing God as Creator of all life over billions of years.

We seek truth, ever learning as we study the natural world and the Bible.

We strive for humility and gracious dialogue with those who hold other views.

We aim for excellence in all areas, from science to education to business practices.

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