

Reformed Theological Seminary

A Short Study of Evangelical Views on Creation in Genesis:
Literal, Epochal, Poetic

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Evangelical Views on Creation in Genesis: Literal, Epochal, Poetic

An evangelical is someone who believes, among other truths, that the Bible is the infallible Word of God and that Jesus Christ is the definitive answer of God for human redemption. How then do we respond as evangelicals to what appears *prima facie* as departures from long-held traditional views of creation?

Evangelicals do not agree on how to understand the creation account in Genesis chapter 1. This may come as a surprise to many evangelicals who might be unaware of the diversity of interpretation to say nothing of their lack of comfort with any view that diverges from their own beliefs. Further, even raising the issue might seem untenable to many evangelical Christians since divergent views are often associated with either liberal views of Scripture, which deny inerrancy, or with atheistic, Darwinian evolution. From the outset we can anticipate the affirmation of those who hold that there is only one evangelical view of original creation and who elevate their interpretation to a level of certitude to that of doctrines considered as fundamental to the Christian faith. However, we cannot ignore the fact that “the doctrine of creation has proved vulnerable because it works in territory where the rights of Christian theology to operate have been subject to sustained challenge, first by natural philosophy and more recently by natural science” (McGrath 1993, 95).

Young, who does not believe in literal twenty-four-hour creation days, admits that “the almost universal view of the Christian world until the eighteenth century was that the Earth was only a few thousand years old. Not until the development of modern scientific investigation of the Earth itself would this view be called into question within the church” (Young 1982, 25). Calvin himself declared “that six days were employed in the formation of the world; not that God, to whom one moment is as a thousand years, had need of this succession of time, but that he might engage us in the consideration of his works” (Calvin 975, 105).

Often it is claimed that non-literal views are an accommodation to modern science. However, Young reminds us: “The facts are that the modern view that the Earth is extremely old was developed by Christian men who believed wholeheartedly in creation and the Flood and who were opposed to evolution” (Young 1982, 66). Yet, the question must be asked: “Is it possible to disagree on creation, particularly the understanding of “day” in Genesis 1-2 and the age of the earth, and still be considered part of the evangelical family?” Or asked differently: “Is there only one evangelical view of creation?”

This brief essay cannot fully answer those questions. However, it might be helpful to further the discussion by surveying the creation views of self-professed evangelicals concerning the related issues of the dating of Genesis and the length of creation days. One of the major questions is the interpretation of the word Hebrew word *yōm* translated “day.” The major views examined will be the literal view, which holds to creation accomplished in six twenty-four-hour days; the epochal view, which understands the days as representative of long periods of time; and the poetic view (or framework view), which de-chronologizes the creation account while not denying creation by divine cause. Literal view proponents advance the theory of a relatively young earth, 6,000-12,000 years old, as the result of a recent creation. Advocates of the epochal and poetic viewpoints theorize an old earth in the distant past counted by millions or billions, not thousands of years.

Critical views of creation which deny the historicity of Genesis or understand creation as myth are beyond the purview of this essay. Harrison notes that “despite the fact that the narratives of creation exhibit the same attitude towards the presentation of truth as their Mesopotamian counterparts, they cannot properly be regarded as myths in themselves” (Harrison 1969, 458). All three evangelical views would agree that “the passage definitely guards against a mythological or parabolic interpretation” and “that God created the creation, and that he made it from no preexistent stuff (*creatio ex nihilo*) in contrast to the beliefs of the other Near Eastern religions” (Dillard and Longman 1994, 52). Concerning *creatio ex nihilo* (creation from nothing) from an epistemological perspective, Frame reminds us that “it is difficult to find anything in the Bible that specifically teaches that the world was created out of nothing,” and that the importance of this doctrine is its negation of the

“pantheistic idea that the world is part of the divine nature and the Platonic picture of the world being created out of a preexisting eternal substance.... The doctrine does not seek to tell us *how* God made the world, except to tell us that He didn’t do it in either of those two ways” (Frame 1987, 233).

Proponents of the various views will be treated in an annotative and representative way in order to provide references for further study. This article cannot survey all the advocates or analyze their line of argumentation.

Literal view of creation

This view sustains that God created the world in six consecutive “morning and evening” twenty-four-hour days and that the earth is relatively young (albeit with the appearance of age). Some who hold this view propose a “gap” in between the original creation (Gen. 1:1) and the re-creation (Gen. 1:3) in order to provide an indeterminable length of time to account for the apparent age of the earth. Genesis 1:2 might be translated “*was* without form and void” or “*had become* without form and void;” the former describing the unshaped, original creation and no gap; the latter emphasizing the chaos resulting from divine judgment on the original creation leading to the reconstruction of the earth. There are serious differences between these two sub-views of the literal interpretation but both hold to literal twenty-four-hour days.

John Davis recognizes that the word *yōm* is used in four ways in Genesis 1-2. (Davis 1975, 51). However, although he admits that *yōm* can also be used metaphorically, he asserts that “it is doubtful that *yōm* ever signified a period of time extending into millions of years, which the day-age theory generally requires” (53).

According to von Rad the “seven days are unquestionably to be understood as actual days and as a unique, unrepeatable lapse of time in the world” (von Rad 1962, 65).

Henry Morris notes that the “Biblical record itself makes it plain that the days of creation are literal days, not indefinite ages.... Even though it may occasionally be possible for the Hebrew word for “day” (*yōm*) to mean an indefinite time, the specific context in Genesis 1 precludes any such meaning here” (Morris 1976, 54).

Allen Ross observes “that ‘waste and void’ in verse 2 gives a key to the six days of creation, the first three correcting the waste or formlessness, and the next three correcting the void or emptiness” (Ross 1988, 104). After examining the use of the word “day” he insists that “it [day] must carry its normal meaning.... It seems inescapable that Genesis presents the creation in six days” (109).

Duncan and Hall affirm that the “historic Christian tradition, which is rooted in a cumulative history of interpretation, has viewed these days mainly as normal days because it has viewed the Genesis account as historical (Duncan and Hall 2001, 22). They hold that “compelling exegetical evidence for reading the creation days as anything other than normal days is lacking” and conclude that “the concerns surrounding this text that bedevil modern interpreters and theologians are hermeneutical and theological, not textual and exegetical” (23).

Proponents of the literal view are convinced that their interpretation gives justice to the normal meaning of the word “day” and often appeal to the history of the church’s interpretation to demonstrate that this traditional view should not be abandoned in the face of modern science. Various arguments are employed to explain how the earth appears to be old as purportedly evidenced in geological studies and the fossil record. It should be noted that the “gap” theory was proposed by early fundamentalist, at least in part, to explain this apparent age. The “gap” theory speculated on a pre-Adamic creation in Genesis 1:1, visited by catastrophic judgment in 1:2, and followed by a re-creation in 1:3. Others, who do not hold to the “gap,” propose that God created the earth with the appearance of age (i.e., Adam created as an adult) which resulted in a mature creation. Coupled with the Noahic Flood to explain the geological record, the idea is sometimes advanced that all dating methods are unreliable. Among the three views surveyed the literal view results in the greatest clash with science.

Epochal view of creation:

This view regards the six days of creation in Genesis 1 as geological ages of unequal length. These ages are required to accommodate the supposed scientific evidence of an earth several billion years old. There are variations among those who advance this view but all agree that the creative work of God was not limited to a creative week of six twenty-four-hour days in the recent past.

Millard Erickson surveys several views and recognizes that “the biblical statement seems quite straightforward. God created the earth in six days” (Erickson 1995, 380). However, after elaborating the strengths and weaknesses of the competing theories he confesses that “the view which I find most satisfactory is a variation of the age-day theory” which “fits quite well with the geological record” (382). He concludes that “while the age-day theory seems the most plausible conclusion at present, we cannot be dogmatic. The age of the universe is a topic which demands continued study and thought” (382).

Gleason Archer likewise reviews interpretative options and settles on “age-day” theory. He asserts that “on the basis of internal evidence it is the writer’s conviction that *yōm* in Genesis 1 could not have been intended by the Hebrew author to mean a literal twenty-four-hour day” (Archer 1979, 186). He answers objections by reference to the usage of “day” in Genesis 2:4 which refers to the creation process of six days. He concludes that “the sequence set forth in the Hebrew account is in harmony with that indicated by the data of geology” (187).

James Boice, after examining various positions, asserted “the possibility of God’s having formed the earth and its life in a series of creative days representing long periods.... Nothing is to be gained by insisting that God had to create all things in six literal twenty-four-hour days” (Boice 1982, 68).

Hugh Ross and Archer are persuaded that the creation account refers to “six sequential, long periods of time,” defend the view that “the physical creation events reported in Genesis appear in correct sequence and in scientifically defensible terms (Ross and Archer 2001, 123), and assert that the “day-age interpretation provides a compelling defense of biblical inerrancy” (156). Interestingly, they maintain that “the day-age interpretation is literal, and we support that contention with linguistic data” and insist that the “challenge is to discern which of the literal interpretations permits an internally and externally consistent reading of God’s word—from Genesis to Revelation” (125).

Poetic view of creation:

This view does not concern itself with explaining time-bound events but with the literary structure in which the account was written, “more a matter of logical structuring than of chronological order” (Erickson 1995, 381). For advocates of this view a literal interpretation is not only unnecessary but unwarranted. The creation account has a theological emphasis on the creator God and was not intended to answer scientific questions concerning the age of the earth or historical days. There are variations that understand the days as six literal, revelatory days in which Moses may have received revelation on the phases of creation.

Bernard Ramm’s progressive creationism may be assimilated to what is often known as the poetic or literary view. He distances himself from the literal view and the gap theory and avers that “Genesis 1:2 is not referring to ruin and destruction but to vacancy awaiting informing” (Ramm 1954, 116). He further holds the necessity of this view in light of the fact that “conservative Christianity is caught between the embarrassments of simple fiat creationism, which is indigestible to modern science, and evolutionism, which is indigestible to much of fundamentalism” (117). Ramm later commented that the “extreme brevity of the [creation] account must temper all our exegesis of it.... Trying to read too much specific detail into this sketch can cause needless conflict with science” (Ramm 1970, 212). He warns that “to attempt to interpret the scientific elements of Genesis 1 *without* science is to attempt the impossible for the concepts and objects of the chapter have meaning only as they are referred to nature...” (213).

Davis Young, commenting on the seventh day, asserts that “the divine week has therefore not ended. Inasmuch as the seventh day is seen as a long, indeterminate period (it is really a *figurative* day), there is no pressing reason to conclude that the six creative days were other than long, indeterminate periods of time” (Young 1977, 86). From that he reasons that the “creation week is best seen as a figurative week, a figurative divine week which serves as the pattern for man’s ordinary, repetitive 168-hour week” (86).

Ronald Youngblood asks: “Is it possible that the order of events in the Genesis 1 story of creation is partly literary and only partly chronological?” He remarks that “the omission of the article (‘the’) from all but the sixth day allows for the possibility of random or literary order as well as rigidly chronological order” (Youngblood 1991, 26). Yet he makes one thing clear: “‘Nonchronological,’ needless to say, does not mean ‘nonhistorical’” (26).

Gordon Wenham, in his commentary on Genesis, clearly opts for a framework understanding of the creation account. He first points out that “Genesis 1-11 is setting out a picture of the world that is at odds both with the polytheistic optimism of ancient Mesopotamia and the humanistic secularism of the modern world” (Wenham 1987, liii). He then affirms that “though historical and scientific questions may be uppermost in our minds as we approach the text, it is doubtful whether they were in the writer’s mind, and we should therefore be cautious about looking for answers to questions he was not concerned with” (liii). He holds that “the distribution of the various creative acts to six days, has been seized on and interpreted over-literally, with the result that science and Scripture have been pitted against each other instead of being seen as complementary” (39). He seeks to demonstrate that “at best, all language about God is analogical. Words used to describe him and his acts must inevitably be human words, but they do not have quite the same meaning when applied to him as when they refer to men” (40). He then concludes that “...Genesis 1 draws attention to the correspondence between God’s work and man’s and God’s rest as a model for the Sabbath, but that does not necessarily imply that the six days of creation are the same as human days” (40).

Irons and Kline claim that “the framework interpretation recognizes the exegetical implications of the unique literary and theological character of this inspired record of the history of creation” and that those who hold this position “are not bound to any particular view of the age of the earth or universe” (Irons and Kline 2001, 217). They further allege that “the framework interpretation stands out among its competitors on account of its sensitivity to the literary, thematic, and theological aspects of the creation narrative” (252).

Proponents of these two views, epochal and poetic, may be accused in some quarters of accommodating modern science. They would surely disagree with that assessment and argue that they seek only to harmonize authoritative but non-scientific divine revelation with indisputable scientific discoveries. They recognize that many Christians “are afraid to integrate science and Scripture—some because they fear that science will shatter their confidence in Scripture, and others because they fear that science might shatter their excuse for ignoring Scripture” (Ross and Archer 2001, 124). They do not deny the *fact* of creation although they disagree on the *facts* of creation. Even the poetic view understands that the “creation week was *characteristically* the era of supernatural creation (Irons and Kline 2001, 235).

Conclusion:

In his forward to the book “The Genesis Debate,” Norman Geisler points out that there are several lessons to learn. 1) “The creation-day debate is not over the *inspiration* of the Bible, but over its *interpretation*,” 2) “The creation-day debate is not one of evangelical *authenticity* but of evangelical *consistency*,” 3) “the *time* of creation is not as important as the *fact* of creation,” 4) “the Church needs to shift its focus to the real enemy – *evolutionism*—not to other forms of *creationism* that remain true to the historicity of the events recorded in Genesis,” and 5) that “just as the issue is not one of *orthodoxy*, so it is also not one of *morality*” (Geisler 2001, 11-12).

One may agree or not with Dillard's opinion that "the description of the creation in these chapters, however, does not allow us to be dogmatic over such questions as the length of time and order of God's creative process...." (Dillard 1994, 51). Yet, whichever of these views may be held by evangelicals, there is no reason to question the authenticity of their evangelical commitment based solely on their view of creation. Neither is there reason to question the historicity of Genesis. In Matthew 19:4-5 Jesus clearly alludes to the creation of Adam and Eve from Genesis 1:27 and cites Genesis 2:24 in His response to the Pharisees questions about divorce. The Apostle Paul also refers to Adam and demonstrates the unity of the race in the fall and redemption (Rom. 5:12ff) and parallels the first Adam with the Lord Jesus (I Cor.15:21-22, 45).

Harrison observes that "there are surprising consonances with scientific discoveries and theories, a situation that is all the more amazing since Genesis 1 was never meant to constitute a scientific document in the accepted occidental sense" (Harrison 1969, 553). Yet we would do well to heed the caveat that "when all the facts are taken into consideration, the Bible gives us true knowledge although not exhaustive knowledge" (Shaeffer 1972, 35). Young is sensitive to the concerns of Christians who feel threatened by challenges to traditional views. Nonetheless, he states that "Christians must realize that the Scriptures do not require us to believe in six twenty-four-hour days of creation. There is legitimate biblical evidence to indicate that the days of creation may have been indefinite periods of time" (Young 1982, 152).

While the Bible does not claim to be a scientific textbook, when and where it speaks the Bible speaks with God's authority. That authority extends to the veracity of the Genesis account of divine creation whether in the recent or distant past. That authority does not extend to the interpretations of the creation event and methodology used for determining the age of the earth. There is no contradiction between true science and theology but there are enigmas and unanswered questions.

On the one hand we must refuse to capitulate to the changing waves of scientific theory and conflicting viewpoints within the scientific community. On the other hand we must not "go beyond what is written" (I Cor. 4:6). The Bible clearly teaches that creation is the work of God's hands and offers no refuge to those who seek a compromise with biological evolution. Whether the Bible clearly teaches a particular viewpoint on creation (literal, epochal, or poetic) will depend in part on one's hermeneutical approach in seeking to understand the divine and authorial intent of Genesis as written to the original audience. Divergence in interpretations does not necessarily imply a departure from biblical truth or exclusion from the evangelical family. According to Hebrews 11:3, "we understand that the universe was created by the word of God." There can be no question as to "what" God did. There may be no resolution among evangelicals about "how" and "when."

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