

Dazed about the Days? - don't be!

Genesis 1:1-2:4: a contribution towards reconciling differences

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THE CREATION DAYS

I offer five propositions, add some explanatory notes and draw conclusions.

1. The primary meaning of the Hebrew term yom (day) is in reference to a normal day of about 24 hours. Unless the context requires otherwise the primary meaning should be maintained.

The Hebrew term yom has the same range of meanings as the English word day. It is natural to immediately think of ordinary days as we read the creation account for the first time, for we have a seven-day week as did Israel. Still, it is a week of divine activity. It's clearly related to our weekly activity but the parallel is of necessity approximate – God does not work and rest in the same way that we do. More on this later.

2. Each of the first six days is qualified by a reference to ‘evening and morning’, which requires the interchange of darkness and light. In a context with numbered days we must think of our week.

Many seem to think that ‘evening and morning’ is just a standard way of describing a whole day, and so ordinary days are self-evidently in view. Others suppose it describes what follows the creative activity.

The Hebrew terms for ‘evening’ and ‘morning’ have the same meaning as in English in the 23 Old Testament examples outside Genesis 1 containing the two words in either order in the same verse. Examples of usage include a period of time during the day, such as the morning or evening sacrifice, a long period marked off by successive evenings and mornings (Dan 8:36), or a period from evening until morning, as when the lamps were lit in the tabernacle (Lev 24:1-4 cf. Ex 30:7-8). A day contains an evening and a morning but it contains more (cf. ‘at morning and at evening and at noonday’ in Psalm 55:17). Evening + morning = one ordinary day is not true - unless the use in Genesis 1 is an exception. It is ‘day’ and ‘night’ that make up a normal day (Gen 1:5), just as in English.

Leaving aside the complexities, and they are not a few, the expression “there was evening and morning” apparently implies that after the day’s work was done time passed into evening at

dusk (so Keil/Delitzsch, Cassuto, Leupold). The first day began with the creation of light, passed through darkness and was completed as light dawned the next day.

If there is an exceptional use, then we could say that as far as creation is concerned a day is defined by the end of darkness through the onset of light. This might suggest that each day's activity could be viewed as a further manifestation of God's glory, moving from what is not, to what is, by his command (cf. 2 Cor 4:6).

3. Each day has a numerical adjective (one, two, three, etc) so that even the first few days before the creation of the sun, moon and stars are not to be distinguished from the rest as if unrelated to our week, especially as the heavenly bodies (day 4) were given to mark off the days. The numerical adjective throughout serves to bind the days into a harmonious unit of a week.

It is frequently added that a numbered series of days always involves ordinary days. However, it should be noted that the first day is more correctly translated 'day one' (so Cassuto), although perhaps the syntax implies a definite article (so Waltke). The next four days lack the definite article (thus, 'a second day' etc), whereas days 6 and 7 have it ('the sixth day', etc). Such features are not found in a series of ordinary days such as Numbers 29:17ff., so they may point to something unusual about the creation days.

4. If God wanted to say eras or ages he could have done so, but did not. Indeed, he qualified the days in ways such as the use of 'evening and morning', so that they are tied to our days. To introduce into the interpretation that the days represent long and overlapping periods of varying length, perhaps corresponding to geological time, is a quite foreign note that distracts from correct understanding. The narrative focuses on the creation week, not long eras.

There are features which suggest an interest other than length of days. The existence of seemingly ordinary days (1-3) without the existence of the heavenly bodies to regulate them would be as strange to the experience of Moses and the Israelites as it is to us. We could resolve this by an appeal to God's almighty power, but perhaps we could just as well suggest that it is not seen as a big issue - unless we are focusing on the when and how rather than the who and why. Also of interest is the way day 4 gives a further perspective on day 1, and anticipates the holy rest day of the God who made the heavenly bodies.

Prominent too, is creation by command, hardly the kind of work we know.

5. The week for humans is patterned on God's creation week, the definitive week for us. We are to imitate God's example. Exodus 20:11 and 31:17 specifically state God created the heavens and the earth in six days, and rested the seventh, and we are to do likewise. While there is no identity there is a real similarity between God's week and

ours. That similarity is sufficient to provide adequate foundation for our life.

The seventh day is not closed by the formula 'there was evening and morning'. Given the explanation of this phrase in #2, and keeping in mind the very careful crafting of the creation narrative, this omission cannot be without meaning: God's rest did not end. Whereas we are to work six days and rest the seventh, God did not follow a pattern of recurring work and rest. He worked six days and then entered on an enduring rest into which he calls humanity, what is otherwise termed eternal life. The goal of eternal life after man has fulfilled his mandate can now be realised only through redemption. Rest is illustrated in the life of Noah (his name is derived from *nuah*, to rest; note also Gen 5:29), in the entry into Canaan (Josh 1:13; Ps 132:14), and in the implications of the psalmist's words long after (Ps 95). It is infallibly interpreted by Hebrews 3:7-4:13 as the goal at the end of our pilgrimage. Then there shall be no night (Rev 22:5) but instead the everlasting brightness of God's presence (Is 60:19-20; Rev 21:23) in an endless day (Zech 14:7) illumined by Jesus, the light of the world and the bright morning star (Rev 22:15), who ends the night of weeping and ushers in the morning of everlasting joy (Ps 30:5).

This interpretation of God's seventh day is supported in John 5:17-19, where Jesus states that whatever the Father does the

Son does, and so parallels his work of restoration on the earthly Sabbath with his Father's continual upholding and blessing of creation on his heavenly Sabbath.

In short, God does not work or rest as we do. He works by his word, and his rest is not like ours, even though Exodus 31:17 is bold to say 'he was refreshed' [not 'he rested' as in NIV], when we know God does not grow faint or weary. God gives the creation account for our sakes! God speaks to ordinary people like you and I, that all may grasp what we need to know of God, ourselves, and of his purpose for us.

CONCLUSIONS

Views of Genesis 1:1-2:3 which allow the intrusion of ideas alien to it should be entirely avoided. The day-age theory was common for around 150 years, until 'scientific literalism' asserted itself. The day-age view is not objectionable merely because it allows for an old earth, for it is not wrong in principle to seek to remove perceived conflict between an interpretation of scripture and apparently correct scientific theory. The objection is that it seeks to remove that conflict through an interpretation that brings in ideas foreign to the text of Scripture. Genesis is not concerned with the age of the earth or geological eras. Rather, God tells us of his creation week in ways that we can understand, with the object of us imitating him as his image-bearers in our weeks. God was sovereign over the darkness, subdued the waters, and populated the earth with creatures. Humans are to rule, subdue and fill the earth too.

Man has a task and a goal: his days reflect God's days but they are not the same; his weekly Sabbath reflects God's unending Sabbath, the destiny in view for him, but it is not the same.

So I think the view propounded by scientific recent-creationists also imposes on the text, and frequently denigrates in a most unpleasant way those who disagree with its approach. It does not adequately recognise that the account is for us, that we may know God and serve him aright. In reaction to the modernist viewpoint, which reduced Genesis to myths and mocked any idea of creation in six days, scientific recent-creationism has an excessive need to prove itself over against the current claims of science. The ordinary believer, the average pastor too, is bombarded with technical jargon, and is prone to miss the very vital theological emphases in the text. There seem to be few recent-creationists who pay heed to the significance of God's rest on day 7 for ultimate destiny and for Lord's Day observance now.

The literary view, which suggests the days are a framework to stress the cohesion and order of creation, has much to offer that should be received, although it is sometimes over-elaborated. I believe it is best to regard God's creation days as simply God's creation days. They are related to our days but are not the same as ours in nature. On this analogical days view creation in six days is dogma, but the nature of those

days in terms of time is not known to us (other than something of day 7). Any further definition of them is speculative.

So how old is the earth? The Bible doesn't say. The scientific *recent-creationist/ordinary days*

view insists on a few thousand years. The *day-age*

view holds that the rather wide investigations in many scientific disciplines, often carried out by Christians, suggest that by and large the earth is very old, although humans are recent. Still, even if the earth is old, Scripture must be allowed to speak in its own terms. The

literary/framework view

does not find difficulty with an old or a young earth *per se*

, nor does the

analogical days

position. Within the principles of Scripture there should be freedom to investigate and hypothesise, as we continue our mandate to rule over the earth. Let us hold fast to the teaching of the creation week. God's week is a pattern for our work and worship until we enter that rest that remains for the people of God (Heb 4:9), that everlasting morning that has no night.

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