

## Excursus I: *Creation in Six Days*

Before we go further in our exposition of the text we must consider the alternatives to the traditional understanding of the six days of creation which have been offered by conservative Christian scholars in an attempt to harmonize Scripture with modern scientific theories regarding the age of the earth and the origin of species.

Our concern in this excursus is exegetical rather than scientific. This is to say that no attempt will be made here to give a scientific critique of Darwin's theory, or a scientific defense of creationism. Instead, we wish to consider what the text of Genesis actually says, and how its author wishes to be understood.

Until very recently interpreters have taken Genesis 1-3 at face value. It has been assumed that these chapters were intended to be understood as giving us an account of real historical events. However, with the rise and eventual dominance of philosophical naturalism, and the scientific theories that have resulted from it, the traditional understanding of Genesis has fallen out of favor among conservative scholarship.

Liberal scholars of both 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries admit that the text of Genesis is clearly meant to be taken in a literal historical sense, although they deny its claims to speak accurately to our space/time cosmos. A large percentage of conservative evangelical scholars refuse to interpret the Genesis text in its plain historical or literal sense in order to accommodate it to the premises of the reigning world view concerning origins. (Douglas Kelly, *Creation and Change*, p. 51)

Only one group of people has a problem with the biblical statements, and that group we may call "modern conservative Christians." The liberal or unbelieving expositor of Genesis has no problem with the text. It is obvious to him that Genesis 1 presents creation and world-building in 144 hours and that Genesis 5 and 11 provide a chronology of the world from creation to Abraham. The modernist and the unbeliever do not accept the Genesis account as historically true; for them it is a myth. But they perceive no problems or ambiguities in the text, nothing that indicates "gaps" in the chronology or some odd kind of "days" in Genesis 1.

Similarly, those whom we may call “traditional conservative believers” also take the text in a simple and obvious way. For them it is quite clear that God made the world around 4000 B.C. and in the span of six ordinary days. This group includes many conservative Lutherans, conservative Calvinists, fundamentalists, and Orthodox Jews.

Thus, we have three groups that have always seen the text as clearly and obviously teaching a recent six-day creation that is chronologically datable from the Bible: (1) the historic Church and historic Judaism; (2) present-day “traditional conservatives”; and (3) unbelievers. We are left with a small group of evangelicals and other types of conservative Christians who are committed to believing the Bible while also being very impressed with the constructs of modern science. For this small group there is a problem with Genesis 1 and with biblical chronology. Unlike the other three groups we have mentioned, this group of people is motivated to search out and find evidence in the text that can relieve them of the burden of having to believe in a young earth and universe. (James Jordan, *Creation in Six Days: A Defense of the Traditional Reading of Genesis One*, pp. 18-19).

Common alternatives to the traditional reading of Genesis 1 are:

1. The Gap Theory
2. The Day-Age Theory
3. The Framework Hypothesis

Each of these is an attempt to reconcile the chapter with the belief that the earth is billions of years old, rather than the six thousand years rendered by a straightforward interpretation.

### *The Gap Theory*

The gap theory derives its name from the belief that there was a vast period of time between the events of Genesis 1:1 and 1:2, a gap of perhaps millions of years. Supposedly a world much like the one we now live in once existed prior to the six days described in 1:3-31. This first world was complete with a race of pre-Adamic human beings and an animal world that survives only in the fossil record. This

original world, it is said, went astray and was completely destroyed by God.<sup>1</sup> This is how the original creation of 1:1 came to be described in 1:2 as “without form and void”.

The Ante-chaotic Age extended from the original creation of the heavens and the Earth and all things therein to the rebellion and overthrow of the first kosmos, or social order on the Earth. It was the dateless period between Gen. 1:1 when the Earth was finished and inhabited in the beginning and Gen. 1:2 when the Earth was first flooded, destroying all life therein. (Finis Jennings Dake, *God's Plan for Man*, p. 113).

The original 1917 edition of the Scofield Reference Bible advocated the gap theory in its note on Genesis 1:2.

Jeremiah 4:23-27; Isaiah 24:1; 45:18 clearly indicate that the earth had undergone a cataclysmic change as the result of divine judgment. The face of the earth bears everywhere the marks of such a catastrophe. There are not wanting intimations which connect it with a previous testing and fall of angels.

As indicated in the Scofield's note, those who espouse the gap theory often turn to Jeremiah 4:23-26 for support. But Jeremiah 4:23-26 is a prophecy of events which were to take place in Jeremiah's own day with the Babylonian invasion, the laying waste of the cities of Judah, and the carrying away of the people into exile. In common with the other prophets of the Old Testament, Jeremiah uses “de-creation” language as an image of temporal judgment.<sup>2</sup>

Though once popular, the gap theory is not widely held today, and for good reason. It is a classic case of eisegesis rather than exegesis. It is doubtful that the theory would have ever originated if interpreters looked only at the text of Scripture. The theory is not driven by textual considerations, but by unproved and, in the very nature of the case, *un-provable* scientific theories.

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<sup>1</sup> Some teach that the souls of pre-Adamic human beings are the angels and demons of the present world order.

<sup>2</sup> Other common “de-creation” images include the sun going dark and the stars falling from the sky (Isa. 13:9-10; 34:4-5; Ezek. 32:7-8; Amos 8:9; etc.)

### *The Day-Age Theory*

The same thing can be said of the day-age theory. Like the gap theory, the day-age theory is an attempt to reconcile Scripture with the belief that the earth is billions of years old. According to this theory, the creative “days” of Genesis are really long eons during which God either guided the process of evolution, or else progressively created newer and higher forms of life. It is pointed out that there is a general correspondence between God’s creative activity during the six “days” mentioned in Genesis 1 and the order of appearance in natural history of stellar phenomena, the emergence of plant and animal life, and finally the appearance of man.

The *exegetical* basis for this view is virtually non-existent. The slender evidence seems to consist solely in the semantic range of the Hebrew word for day, *yom*, which can be used in both a literal and non-literal way.<sup>3</sup> There are several indications, however, that the word should be used literally in Genesis 1.

1. The repetition of the phrase “evening and morning” seems quite out of place if a literal 24 hour period is not in view
2. The enumeration of days suggests literal 24 hour days. “In the 119 cases in Moses’ writings where the Hebrew word *yom* stands in conjunction with a numerical adjective (first, second, third, etc.), it never means anything other than a literal day. The same is true of the 357 instances outside the Pentateuch, where numerical adjectives occur.” (Kenneth L. Gentry, “Reformed Theology and Six Day Creation”)
3. The divine pattern of six days of work followed by one day of rest serves as a model for human activity.

### *The Framework Hypothesis*

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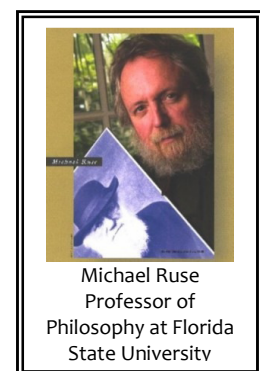
<sup>3</sup> For some examples of non-literal uses, see Gen. 2:4; Ps. 20:1; 110:3; 140:7; Isa. 34:8; 52:6; etc.

The Framework Hypothesis or Framework Interpretation holds that the first chapter of Genesis is not a literal description of historical events but is a literary device designed to give a theology of creation and establish a basis for the observance of a Sabbath. The text, however, does not bear the literary marks indicating such an interpretation. There is a seamless transition in the storyline from section to section without a hint that any of it is non-historical. Douglas Kelly quotes Oxford professor James Barr,

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; (b) the figures contained in the Genesis genealogies provided by simple addition a chronology from the beginning of the world up to later stages in the Biblical story; and (c) Noah's flood was understood to be worldwide and to have extinguished all human and land animal life except for those in the ark. 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 professor, as far as I know. (Cited in Douglas Kelly, *Creation and Change*, pp. 50-51)

### *Six Day Creation, Bad Religion?*

It has been argued that belief in a recent, literal six day creation is a relatively new development, originating in a desire to meet the challenges posed to the Christian faith by the theory of evolution. Philosopher Michael Ruse, a self-confessed "enthusiastic evolutionist" and "fanatical supporter of the theory of natural selection of Charles Darwin," makes the rather surprising claim that creationism is both "false science and bad religion." His claim that creationism is "false science" is itself false, of course, as many others have shown. But the point I am interested in is his argument that creationism is bad



religion. Amazingly, Ruse states, "Creationism is...bad religion. It is not traditional Christianity, either Catholic or Protestant."<sup>4</sup> The account of creation given in Genesis, we are told, is not to be taken at face value, and the Fathers of the Church, as well as the leaders in both the Roman Catholic and Protestant churches, interpreted the account figuratively.

The fact of the matter is, however, that belief in a literal six day creation *a la* Genesis is traditional Christianity, as a careful survey of historical theology reveals. It is true that a number of Christian thinkers through the centuries applied a figurative sense to the Biblical account of creation. But it does not follow that they thereby denied a literal sense. Barnabas (c. A.D. 100), for instance, held to a literal six-day creation, but also argued that the six days were intended by God to foreshadow six thousand years of human history from creation to the consummation of all things.

The Sabbath is mentioned at the beginning of creation [thus]: "And God made in six days the works of His hands, and made an end on the seventh day, and rested on it, and sanctified it." Attend, my children, to the meaning of this expression, "He finished in six days." This implieth that the Lord will finish all things in six thousand years, for a day is with Him a thousand years. And He Himself testifieth, saying, "Behold, to-day will be as a thousand years." Therefore, my children, in six days, that is, in six thousand years, all things will be finished.<sup>5</sup>

Irenaeus (A.D. 120-202) taught the same thing.

For in as many days as this world was made, in so many thousand years shall it be concluded. And for this reason the Scripture says: "Thus the heaven and the earth were finished, and all their adornment. And God brought to a conclusion upon the sixth day the works that He had made; and God rested upon the seventh day from all His works." This is an account of the things formerly created, as also it is a prophecy of what is to come. For the day of the Lord is as a thousand years; and in six days created things were completed: it is evident, therefore, that they will come to an end at the sixth thousand year.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> These quotations of Michael Ruse are from a letter he wrote to the editor of the Pratt Tribune in September 2000.

<sup>5</sup> *Epistle of Barnabas* XV in Alexander Roberts & James Donaldson, eds., *Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1994), vol. 1, p. 146

<sup>6</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* V.xxviii.3, vol. 1, p. 557

Theophilus (c. A.D. 175) taught that “God made all things out of nothing” in six literal days.<sup>7</sup>

Hippolytus (c. A.D. 230) likewise confessed his belief in a literal six-day creation *ex nihilo* in the recent past. “On the first day God made what He made out of nothing. But on the other days He did not make out of nothing, but out of what He had made on the first day, by moulding it according to his pleasure.”<sup>8</sup>

Archelaus (c. A.D. 277) in his *Disputation with Manes*, says, “God...made the world, and all things that are in it, in the space of six days.”<sup>9</sup>

Methodius (c. A.D. 300) speaks of “the creation of the world in six days being still recent.”<sup>10</sup>

Victorinus (c. A.D. 300) said, “God produced that entire mass for the adornment of His majesty in six days.”<sup>11</sup>

Lactantius (c. A.D. 325), in *The Divine Institutes*, says,

Plato and many others of the philosophers, since they were ignorant of the origin of all things, and of that primal period at which the world was made, said that many thousands of ages had passed since this beautiful arrangement of the world was completed; and in this they perhaps followed the Chaldeans, who, as Cicero has related in his first book respecting divination, foolishly say that they possess comprised in their memorials four hundred and seventy thousand years; in which matter, because they thought that they could not be convicted [proved wrong], they believed that they were at liberty to speak falsely. But we, whom the Holy Scriptures instruct to the knowledge of the truth, know the beginning and the end of the world...

<sup>7</sup> *Theophilus to Autolytus*, II.x-xix in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 2, pp. 97-102

<sup>8</sup> See his comments on Genesis 1:6 in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 5, p. 163

<sup>9</sup> *The Disputation with Manes*, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 6, p. 203

<sup>10</sup> *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins* (VII.v) in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 6, p. 333

<sup>11</sup> *On the Creation of the World* in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 1994), vol. 7, p. 341

Therefore let the philosophers, who enumerate thousands of ages from the beginning of the world, know that the six thousandth year is not yet completed, and that when this number is completed the consummation must take place, and the condition of human affairs be remodeled for the better... Therefore, since all the works of God were completed in six days, the world must continue in its present state through six ages, that is, six thousand years. For the great day of God is limited by a circle of a thousand years, as the prophet shows, who says "In Thy sight, O Lord, a thousand years are as one day." And as God labored during those six days in creating such great works, so His religion and truth must labor during these six thousand years, while wickedness prevails and bears rule. And again, since God, having finished His works, rested the seventh day and blessed it, at the end of the six thousandth year all wickedness must be abolished from the earth, and righteousness reign for a thousand years; and there must be tranquillity and rest from the labors which the world now has long endured.<sup>12</sup>

It is indeed surprising to see Ruse claim that Augustine (354-430) "wanted no truck with Creationist miracle-mongering," because aside from the fact that Augustine affirmed the truth of the miracles of Scripture, and even reported in a personal correspondence a miracle with which he was acquainted in his own day (Letter 227, to Alypius), he also affirmed his belief in the doctrine of creation as revealed in Genesis. He taught that God created matter "out of nothing."<sup>13</sup> And though he believed that this matter might have existed as a formless void for a very long period of time before the six-days of creation, he otherwise taught the Biblical account of creation much like modern Evangelical creationists. There is one notable exception: instead of teaching six literal days of creation, he said there was a six-fold aspect to creation that took place on just *one* day.<sup>14</sup> Further, he said, "we find that not 6000 years have yet passed" (City of God, XII.x).<sup>15</sup> These things he elsewhere said we "must unhesitatingly believe" (City of God, XI.vii).

Thomas Aquinas (c. 1225-1274) took the six days of creation to be literal days. He objected to Augustine's view that there was really only one day of creation.

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<sup>12</sup> Lactantius, *The Divine Institutes* in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 7, p. 211

<sup>13</sup> Augustine, *The Confessions*, XII.vii in Whitney J. Oates, ed., *Basic Writings of Augustine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1992), vol. 1, p. 207

<sup>14</sup> Augustine, *The City of God*, XI.ix in Whitney J. Oates, ed., *Basic Writings of Augustine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1992), vol. 2, p. 151

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, XII.x, p. 189

“Augustine,” he says, “differs from other expositors.” He says further, “The words *one day* are used when day is first instituted, to denote that one day is made up of twenty-four hours. Hence, by mentioning ‘one,’ the measure of a natural day is fixed.”<sup>16</sup>

Ruse’s comment that John Calvin (1509-1564) “stayed out of the business of reading the glory of God’s handiwork from the Pentateuch” is astonishing. The fact of the matter is that Calvin *did* see the glory of God in the Pentateuch, and especially in creation. “In the creation of the universe he brought forth those insignia whereby he shows his glory to us, whenever and wherever we cast our gaze.”<sup>17</sup> Calvin taught that the creation of the universe took place in “the space of six days”<sup>18</sup> less than six thousand years ago (Institutes I.xiv.1).<sup>19</sup> Calvin clearly understands Scripture as giving us an accurate picture of the span of time since the beginning of the world.

Therefore it was his will that the history of Creation be made manifest, in order that the faith of the church, resting upon this, might seek no other God but him who was put forth by Moses as the Maker and Founder of the universe.

Therein time was first marked so that by a continuing succession of years believers might arrive at the primal source of the human race and of all things.

Consistent with its Calvinist roots, the Westminster Confession of Faith (1647) speaks of both creation in six days, and the glory of God manifested in creation. It states, “It pleased God the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, for the manifestation of the glory of his eternal power, wisdom, and goodness, in the beginning, to create, or make of nothing, the world, and all things therein whether visible or invisible, in the space of six days.”<sup>20</sup>

Shall we also speak of James Ussher (1581-1656), the Irish cleric who dated the

<sup>16</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* First Part, Q. 74. Art. 3 in *Great Books of the Western World*, edited by Robert Maynard Hutchins (Chicago, IL: Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., 1952), vol. 19, p. 377

<sup>17</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* I.5.1, translated and edited by Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1950), p. 52

<sup>18</sup> John Calvin, *Calvin’s Commentaries* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1996), vol. 1, p. 78

<sup>19</sup> *Institutes of the Christian Religion* I.xiv.1

<sup>20</sup> Westminster Confession of Faith 4.1

creation of the world at 4004 B.C., and whose basic Bible chronology was widely accepted in the church for three centuries?

Much more could be said. But this is sufficient to put the lie to Ruse's claim that "creationism is not traditional Christianity, either Catholic or Protestant." The truth is that some 20th century Christians have defected from Biblical Christianity and traded in the trustworthy account of origins found in Scripture for the secular myth of evolution.