

What do Christians Believe about the Length of the Creation Days?



Are the “days” of the creation story literal, 24-hour days?

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Background

“ *Most Christians have generally taken a strict literal view of creation: a universe and all life created in a single week.* ”

The majority of scientists in the world today affirm that the creation of the universe could not have taken place in six 24-hour (i.e., solar) days. They claim there is just too much evidence to

support a view that the universe is ancient: the creation events described in Genesis had to have occurred over billions of years. On the other hand, most Christians

have generally taken a strict literal view of creation: a universe and all life created in a single week. This has been a hotly contested subject for nearly the entire history of the Christian Church. The interpretations of the “days” of Genesis are more diverse than one might expect. I will explain what I consider to be the most important of the different theories below.

Let me first say that I have no compelling reason to dogmatically hold to any particular view with respect to the days of Genesis. If one believes in God, then one will surely agree that God *could* have created the universe in any number of ways and certainly in any time frame. But the question that confounds many is, “What time frame *did* He choose?” For the purpose of this article, the crucial question seems to be this: “Should the days of creation be interpreted in strict literal fashion, or is there another likely interpretation?”

Not All Words Can be Taken Literally¹

In answering the question posed above, one should recognize that *anthropomorphic*² and *figurative*³ language is commonly used in Genesis. And if so, why couldn't the days of creation be some sort of *literary device*?⁴

“So, since literary devices other than strict literal language were used in the early chapters of Genesis, it is quite possible that Moses had some other purpose in mind when referring to “days” in the creation narrative.

For example, Genesis 2:2 says: “By the seventh day God completed His work which He had done, and *He rested* on the

seventh

day from all His work which He had done” (NASB95, italics added). But did God truly need to “rest”? Isn’t it possible that an all-powerful, infinite Being was not truly worn out from His efforts? Indeed, isn’t it possible that this verse was merely referring to the *completion* of the creative process? In other words, just as the seventh day represents the end of any given week, the seventh creative day could have simply signaled the end of God’s creative process, and said nothing about His need to rest.

And what about the curse on the serpent? “Because you have done this... *you will eat dust all the days of your life*” (Gen. 3:14, NIV, italics added). Does the curse indicate that the future diet of the serpent would consist solely of dirt? Or could it simply mean that the serpent would henceforth become symbolic of evil, *and would serve as a perpetual reminder of the temptation and fall of man*? In this verse, the expression to “eat dust” is an example of figurative, or symbolic, language.

So, since literary devices other than strict literal language were used in the early chapters of Genesis, it is quite possible that Moses⁵ had some other purpose in mind when referring to “days” in the creation narrative.

In the next few sections, I will lay out five perspectives on the meaning of the word “day” as it was used in the creation story. Each of these views have been widely held by Christians throughout the history of the Church and there are sometimes overlapping elements across these positions.

Solar Day Theory

Perhaps the most popular view, historically, is that the six creative days were literal 24-hour days. While some early church fathers like Origen and Augustine did not interpret the days

as

24-hour cycles, others, such as Martin Luther, defended a strict literal interpretation.

According to Allan P. Ross (1985, 28), the word “day” (Hebrew: *yôm*), when used in concert with ordinal numbers (first day, second day, third day, etc.), must refer to a 24-hour period because that particular construction always suggests a 24-hour day in the Old Testament. Thus, since this form *was*, in fact, used in the creation narrative, the days must be viewed literally.

Exodus 20:8-11

also seems to indicate a 24-hour day. The Israelites were instructed to work six days and rest on the seventh (i.e., sabbath day), just as God did in creation:

Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath.... For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day.”

(Ex. 20:8-11, NASB)

Adherents of

the solar day theory believe that a strict literal interpretation of the days of Genesis best accounts for the meaning of the biblical text. Accordingly, the plain teaching of the Bible must be that God’s creative work was completed in a week of seven 24-hour days.

Day-Age Theory

☾☾ *Genesis 2:4 is an example of the use of the Hebrew word *yôm* to mean a longer period of time: “This is the account of the heavens and the earth when they were created, in the day that the Lord God made earth and heaven”*

Some have held that the days of Genesis were long periods of geological time. This position falls under the rubric of “day-age theory.” On this account, each day represented an *extended period of time*, separated in the biblical narrative by the following formulaic transition: “And there was evening, and there was morning—the [___] day.” These seven periods or stages are said to represent the geological and biological history of the universe, but there is no indication of how long each of the periods lasted, nor are the days necessarily of equal lengths. There is biblical support for this alternative meaning of the word “day.” Genesis 2:4 is an example of the use of the Hebrew word *yôm* to mean a longer period of time: “This is the account of the heavens and the earth when they were created, *in the day that the Lord God made earth and heaven*” (NASB95, italics added). This usage of the word *day* refers to the entire creative process and is clearly not intended to represent a single 24-hour period. Thus, the word *yôm* can be used to mean an *indefinite or extended period of time*.

Within the day-age framework, each day may have represented thousands, or even millions, of years (e.g., 2 Pet. 3:8; Ps. 90:4). The days of Genesis do refer to literal periods of time, but the intervals are not necessarily of equal duration. This view represents an attempt to harmonize the geological record with the days of Genesis.

Gap Theory

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The gap theory is another way of viewing the days of Genesis. Though the defenders of this view have slight variations in their interpretations, the theory can be stated something like this: In long ages past, God created the entirety of the universe, which is described in the opening verse of Genesis: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” For the next few billion years, the universe expanded and developed, and after quite some time, the earth appeared as part of our solar system. On earth, geological formations ebbed and flowed and early life forms appeared and progressed. But, at some point in time, a cataclysmic event rendered the earth barren and uninhabitable (perhaps due to one of any number of mass extinction events). The state of the earth at that time was reflected in Genesis 1:2, “The earth was formless and void, and darkness was over the surface of the deep” (NASB95).

So, sometime in relatively recent history, God reconditioned the earth in *six literal days*, which is described in Genesis 1:3-31. During that time, God took the earth, which was dark, formless and empty, and once again made it habitable for all forms of life. In this view, there was a gap between verse 1, which was the original creation, and verse 3, which represented the beginning of the restructuring of the earth.

Adherents of this position agree with the scientific consensus that the universe and earth are very old and yet also support a plain, literal reading of the days of creation. Thus, in this view, each day represented a 24-hour period during which the

various features of the earth were restructured to bring order out of chaos, and to restore life to an uninhabited planet. By the seventh day, God had not only completed this creative activity, He had also reestablished order and stability in the geological and biological features of the world, which has continued to the present day.

Days as Description of Functions Theory⁶

There is another view that presents the days as literary devices used to convey the purpose or function of the features of creation. In this perspective, the days don't necessarily refer to any particular period of time but rather served as the vehicle through which God communicated His purpose for the different features of creation.⁷

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This position

takes its shape within the cultural background of the people to whom the creation account was originally written. How would they have understood the creation narrative? After many years serving as slaves in Egypt, the Israelites were concerned with a promised homeland where they could live in peace and security. To them, the creation story not only demonstrated God's power to create everything that exists, but it also reinforced the value of man, above all other created things. It was *this* God who had promised to bring them into a land of their own possession.

By the time the book of Genesis was written, the seven-day week had been long established and was well-understood as a common unit of time. The analogy of the seven-day week served as an easy way to understand and remember the features of creation. The creation of night, day, sky, land, plants, lights in the

heavens (i.e., planets, stars), animals, and humans, easily fit into the framework of the seven-day week, which was widely considered to be the number of perfection or completeness.⁸

The creation account represented a literal historical event, but it was not necessarily couched in strict literal language. Nor was it framed in scientific language: we should not expect to find scientific concepts hidden in the ancient Hebrew vocabulary.

Thus, Moses's description of creation may have focused on the fact that God formed a world where everything in the created order had a function or purpose. The Genesis narrative explained that God's purpose was to create every good thing for mankind and to call out a people for Himself who would become a blessing to the nations. The importance of the creation story was not to focus on the creation of matter, *per se*, but rather to show that *God provided a function for each bit of matter* so that the creation would be seen as a special blessing and an opportunity for mankind to flourish.

Pictorial Revelatory Day Theory

Another concept of the length of the creative days is called the pictorial revelatory day theory, which holds that the specifics of the days of creation were revealed in six days, not performed in six days. The purpose of the Genesis creation narrative was theological and religious. There was no need to describe how God created or how long it took—both of which were swallowed up in the theological expression of creation. In this perspective, the actual process of creation took place over billions of years, but God revealed the features of creation to early man in a vision of the past.

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In ancient times, God sometimes communicated to man through dreams or visions. Bernard Ramm (1974) believed the prehistoric past was communicated to man through a vision in which the events of creation were revealed pictorially, visually, and optically—in very much the same manner as events of the future were revealed to the ancient prophets (p. 149 ff.). Therefore, each creative scene could have been revealed to man within the various days of a vision of the past. The days were not literal, nor were they age-days, but instead were pictorial revelatory days that served as the means through which God revealed Himself as the Creator of all.

This special revelation—if not given directly to Moses—could have been disclosed to one of his ancestors and then passed on to Moses through oral and, eventually, written tradition.

Conclusion

By all accounts, the creation of the universe and all living things took place long before the time of Moses. Since the actual creation was so far removed from the time and culture of the author, it is hard to know for sure how the days are to be interpreted.

Whatever the intent of the author of *Genesis*, the subject of the length of the creation days was clearly not a stated concern in the narrative. Moses did not dwell on the meaning of the term “day” as it was used in the creation story. This suggests one of two possible understandings: Either Moses had no reason to assume anything other than a literal 24-hour construct, or perhaps he simply

understood that the concept of the seven-day week could serve as an easily accepted framework for discussing the important features of creation. After all, no humans were present to witness the days of creation and would, therefore, require a readily understood analogy to help them grasp the concept. If God communicated the creation story to ancient humans, then His language would have been commensurate with their understanding. But this means that God could have revealed the necessary details of creation either within a *literal* or a *literary* framework.

In summary, the length of days in Genesis could have been: (1) literal 24-hour days that marked the *first and only* creation of the universe, the earth, and all life; (2) age-days that represented long periods of indeterminate length; (3) literal 24-hour days that marked the re-creation (i.e., upgrade) of the earth billions of years after the beginning of the universe; (4) descriptions of the functions of creation presented in seven phases corresponding to a seven-day week; or (5) pictorial revelatory days—a vision of creation that was revealed over the span of seven days.

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Footnotes