

The Article

Reading Between the Fossil Lines

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One of the most frequently argued objections to the trustworthiness of Scripture is found in the apparent discrepancy between the account of creation given in Genesis 1 and the supposed evidence from the fossils and fissionable minerals in the geological strata that indicated Earth is billions of years old. Yet Genesis 1 allegedly teaches that creation took place in six twenty-four-hour days, at the end of which man was already on the earth. But this conflict between Genesis 1 and the factual data of science (in contradistinction to the theories of some scientists who draw inferences from their data that are capable of quite another interpretation by those equally proficient in geology) is only apparent, not real.

To be sure, if we were to understand Genesis 1 in a completely literal fashion—which some suppose to be the only proper principle of interpretation if the Bible is truly inerrant and completely trustworthy—then there would be no possibility of reconciliation between modern scientific theory and the Genesis account. But a true and proper belief in the inerrancy of Scripture involves neither a literal nor a figurative rule of interpretation. What it does require is a belief in whatever the biblical author (human and divine) actually meant by the words he used.

An absolute literalism would, for example, commit us to the proposition that in Matthew 19:24 (and parallel passages) Christ actually meant to teach that a camel could go through the eye of a needle. But it is abundantly clear that Christ was simply using the familiar rhetorical figure of hyperbole in order to emphasize how difficult it is spiritually for a rich man (because of his pride in his material wealth) to come to repentance and saving faith in God. To construe that passage literally would amount to blatant heresy, or at least a perversity that has nothing to do with orthodoxy. Or again, when Jesus said to the multitude that challenged Him to work some miracle, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up” (John 2:19), they grievously erred when they interpreted His remarks literally. John 2:21 goes on to explain that Jesus did not mean this prediction literally but spiritually: “But He was speaking about the temple of His body. Therefore when He was raised from the dead, His disciples remembered that He said this, and they believed the Scripture.” In this case, then, literal interpretation was dead wrong because that was not what Jesus meant by the language He used; He was actually referring to the far greater miracle of His bodily resurrection.

It thus becomes clear in this present case, as we study the text of Genesis 1, that we must not short-circuit our responsibility of careful exegesis in order to ascertain as clearly as possible what the divine author meant by the language His inspired prophet (in this case probably Moses) was guided to employ. Is the true purpose of Genesis 1 to teach that all creation began just six twenty-four-hour days before Adam was “born”? Or is this just a mistaken inference that overlooks other biblical data having a direct bearing on this passage? To answer this question we must take careful note of what is said in Genesis 1:27 concerning the creation of man as the closing act of the sixth creative day. There it is stated that on the sixth day (apparently toward the end of the day, after all the animals had

Questions

Based on this opening paragraph, what do you believe is the purpose of this essay?

What does “inerrancy” mean?

What is the main idea of this paragraph?

What point is the author trying to demonstrate with these biblical examples?

What is meant by exegesis?

been fashioned and placed on the earth—therefore not long before sundown at the end of that same day), “God created man in His own image; He created them male *and female*.” This can only mean that Eve was created in the closing hour of Day Six, along with Adam.

As we turn to Genesis 2, however, we find that a considerable interval of time must have intervened between the creation of Adam and the creation of Eve. In 2:15 we are told that Yahweh Elohim (i.e., the Lord God) put Adam in the Garden of Eden as the ideal environment for his development, and there he was to cultivate and keep the enormous park, with all its goodly trees, abundant fruit crop, and four mighty rivers that flowed from Eden to other regions of the Near East. In 2:18 we read, “Then the Lord God said, ‘It is not good for the man to be alone; I will make him a helper suitable for him.’” This statement clearly implies that Adam had been diligently occupied in his responsible task of pruning, harvesting fruit, and keeping the ground free of brush and undergrowth for a long enough period to lose his initial excitement and sense of thrill at this wonderful occupation in the beautiful paradise of Eden. He had begun to feel a certain lonesomeness and inward dissatisfaction.

In order to compensate for this lonesomeness, God then gave Adam a major assignment in natural history. He was to classify every species of animal and bird found in the preserve. With its...mighty rivers and broad expanse, the garden must have had hundreds of species of mammal, reptile, insect, and bird, to say nothing of the flying insects that also are indicated by the basic Hebrew term *’ôp* (“bird”) (2:19). It took the Swedish scientist Linnaeus several decades to classify all the species known to European scientists in the eighteenth century. Doubtless there were considerably more by that time than in Adam’s day; and, of course, the range of fauna in Eden may have been more limited than those available to Linnaeus. But at the same time it must have taken a good deal of study for Adam to examine each specimen and decide on an appropriate name for it, especially in view of the fact that he had absolutely no human tradition behind him, so far as nomenclature was concerned. It must have required some years, or, at the very least, a considerable number of months for him to complete this comprehensive inventory of all the birds, beasts, and insects that populated the Garden of Eden.

Finally, after this assignment with all its absorbing interest had been completed, Adam felt a renewed sense of emptiness. Genesis 2:20 ends with the words “but for Adam no suitable helper was found.” After this long and unsatisfying experience as a lonely bachelor, God saw that Adam was emotionally prepared for a wife—a “suitable helper.” God, therefore, subjected him to a deep sleep, removed from his body the bone that was closest to his heart, and from that physical core of man fashioned the first woman. Finally God presented woman to Adam in all her fresh, unspoiled beauty, and Adam was ecstatic with joy.

As we have compared Scripture with Scripture (Gen 1:27 with 2:15-22), it has become very apparent that Genesis 1 was never intended to teach that the sixth creative day, when Adam and Eve were *both* created, lasted a mere twenty-four hours. In view of the long interval of time between these two, it would seem to border on sheer irrationality to insist that all of Adam’s experiences in Genesis 2:15-22 could have been crowded into the last hour or two of a literal twenty-four-

What is the main idea of this paragraph?

Why does the author believe “it would seem to border on sheer irrationality to insist” the days in

hour day. The only reasonable conclusion to draw is that the purpose of Genesis 1 is not to tell how fast God performed His work of creation (though, of course, some of His acts, such as the creation of light on the first day, must have been instantaneous). Rather, its true purpose was to reveal that the Lord God who had revealed Himself to the Hebrew race and entered into personal covenant relationship with them was indeed the only true God, the Creator of all things that are. This stood in direct opposition to the religious notions of the heathen around them, who assumed the emergence of a pantheon of gods in successive stages out of preexistent matter of unknown origin, actuated by forces for which there was no accounting.

Genesis 1 is a sublime manifesto, totally rejecting all the cosmogonies of the pagan cultures of the ancient world as nothing but baseless superstition. The Lord God Almighty existed before all matter, and by His own word of command He brought the entire physical universe into existence, governing all the great forces of wind, rain, sun, and sea according to His sovereign will. This stood in stark contrast to the clashing, quarreling, capricious little deities and godlets spawned by the corrupt imagination of the heathen. The message and purpose of Genesis 1 is the revelation of the one true God who created all things out of nothing and ever keeps the universe under His sovereign control.

The second major aspect of Genesis 1 is the revelation that God brought forth His creation in an orderly and systematic manner. There were six major stages in this work of formation, and these stages are represented by successive days of a week. In this connection it is important to observe that none of the six creative days bears a definite article in the Hebrew text; the translations “*the* first day,” “*the* second day,” etc., are in error. The Hebrew says, “And the evening took place, and the morning took place, day one” (1:5). Hebrew expresses “the first day” by *hayyôm hāri ’šôn*, but this text says simply *yôm ’ehād* (“day one”). Again, in v.8 we read not *hayyôm haššēnī* (“the second day”) but *yôm šēnī* (“a second day”). In Hebrew prose of this genre, the definite article was generally used where the noun was intended to be definite; only in poetic style could it be omitted. The same is true with the rest of the six days; they all lack the definite article. Thus they are well adapted to a sequential pattern, rather than to strictly delimited units of time.

Genesis 1:2-5 thus sets forth the first stage of creation: the formation of light. This must have meant primarily the light of the sun and the other heavenly bodies. Sunlight is a necessary precondition to the development of plant life and animal life, generally speaking (though there are some subterranean forms of life that manage to do without it).

Genesis 1:6-8 presents the second stage: the formation of an “expanse” (*rāqia’*) that separated between moisture in suspension in the sky and moisture condensed enough to remain on the earth’s surface. The term *raqia’* does not mean a beaten-out metal canopy, as some writers have alleged—no ancient culture ever taught such a notion in its concept of the sky—but simply means “a stretched-out expanse.” This is quite evident from Isaiah 42:5, where the cognate verb *rāqa’* is used: “Thus says the God Yahweh, the Creator of the heavens, and the one who stretched them out [from the verb *nātāh*, ‘to extend’ curtains or tent cords], the one who extended [*rōqa’*] the earth and that which it produces [the noun *se*”

Genesis 1 were 24-hour days? Is the argument logical? Explain.

According to this paragraph, what is the message of Genesis 1?

What is the main idea of this paragraph?

sā'im refers always to plants and animals].” Obviously *rāqa* ‘ could not here mean “beat out,” “stamp out” (though it is often used that way in connection with metal working); the parallelism with *nātāh* (noted above) proves that here it has the force of extend or expand. Therefore, the noun *rāqīa* ‘ can mean only “expanse,” without any connotation of a hard metal plate.

Genesis 1:9-13 relates the third stage in God’s creative work, the receding of the waters of the oceans, seas, and lakes to a lower altitude than the masses of land that emerged above them and thus were allowed to become dry. Doubtless the gradual cooling of the planet Earth led to the condensation of water necessary to bring about this result; seismic pressures producing mountains and hills doubtless contributed further to this separation between land and sea. Once this dry land (*hayyabbāšāh*) appeared, it became possible for plant life and trees to spring up on the earth’s surface, aided by photosynthesis from the still beclouded sky.

Genesis 1:14-19 reveals that in the fourth creative stage God parted the cloud cover enough for direct sunlight to fall on the earth and for accurate observation of the movements of the sun, moon, and stars to take place. Verse 16 should not be understood as indicating the creation of the heavenly bodies for the first time on the fourth creative day; rather it informs us that the sun, moon, and stars created on Day One as the source of light had been placed in their appointed places by God with a view to their eventually functioning as indicators of time (“signs, seasons, days, years”) to terrestrial observers. The Hebrew verb *wayya ‘as* in v.16 should better be rendered “Now [God] *had made* the two great luminaries, etc.,” rather than as simple past tense, “[God] *made*.” (Hebrew has no special form for the pluperfect tense but uses the perfect tense, or the conversive imperfect as here, to express either the English past or the English pluperfect, depending on the context.)

Genesis 1:20-23 relates that on the fifth creative day God fully developed marine life, freshwater life, and introduced flying creatures (whether insects, lizards, or winged birds). It is interesting to observe that the fossil bearing strata of the Paleozoic era contain the first evidence of invertebrate animal life with startling suddenness in the Cambrian period. There is no indication in the pre-Cambrian strata of how the five thousand species of marine and terrestrial animal life of the Paleozoic era may have developed, for there is no record of them whatever prior to the Cambrian levels (cf. D. Dewar, “The Earliest Known Animals,” *Journal of the Transactions of the Victoria Institute* 80 [1948]: 22-29).

Genesis 1:24-26 records that in the sixth and final stage of the creative process, God brought forth all the land animals after their various species (*l'mînāh* in v.24 and *l'mînēhū* in v.25 mean “according to its kind,” whether the antecedent was male or female in grammatical gender), culminating finally in the creation of man, as discussed more extensively above.

In this connection, a comment is in order concerning the recurring formula at the end of each creative day: “And it was/became evening, and it became/was morning, a second day” or whatever ordinal it might be). The reason for this closing statement seems to have been twofold. First, it was necessary to make clear whether the *symbolic unit* involved was a mere sunrise-to-sundown day, or

whether it was a twenty-four-hour day. The term *yôm* (“day”) could mean either. In fact, the first time *yôm* occurs is in v.5: “And He called the light *day*, and the darkness He called night.” Therefore, it was necessary to show that each of the creative days was symbolized by a complete twenty-four-hour cycle, beginning at sunset of the previous day (according to our reckoning) and ending with the daylight portion, down to the setting of the sun, on the following day (as we would reckon it).

Second, the twenty-four-hour day serves as a better symbol than a mere daylight day in regard to the commencement and completion of one stage of creation before the next stage began. There were definite and distinct stages in God’s creational procedure. If this be the true intention of the formula, then it serves as no real evidence for a literal twenty-four-hour-day concept on the part of the biblical author.

Some have argued that the reference in the Decalogue (commandment four) to God’s resting on the seventh day as a basis for honoring the seventh day of each week strongly suggests the literal nature of “day” in Genesis 1. This is not at all compelling, however, in view of the fact that there was to be any day of the week especially set aside from labor to center on the worship and service of the Lord, then it would have to be a twenty-four-hour day (Saturday) in any event. As a matter of fact, Scripture does not at all teach that Yahweh rested only one twenty-four-hour day at the conclusion of His creative work. No closing formula occurs at the close of the seventh day, referred to in Genesis 2:2-3. And, in fact, the New Testament teaches (in Heb. 4:1-11) that the seventh day, that “Sabbath rest,” in a very definite sense has continued on right into the church age. If so, it would be quite impossible to line up the seventh-day Sabbath with the Seventh Day that concluded God’s original work of creation!

One last observation concerning the word *yôm* as used in Genesis 2:4. Unlike some of the modern versions, KJV correctly renders this verse “These are the generations of the heavens of the earth when they were created, in the *day* that the Lord God made the earth and the heavens.” Since the previous chapter has indicated that there were at least six days involved in creating the heavens and the earth, it is abundantly evident that *yôm* [*sic*] in Genesis 2:4 cannot possibly be meant as a twenty-four-hour day—unless perchance the Scripture contradicts itself!

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What is the main idea of this paragraph? What is the purpose of referencing Hebrews 4:1-11 in this section?

What argument is the author trying to make by comparing Genesis 2:4 with Genesis 1?

What was the author’s purpose in this essay? Did he achieve his purpose? Explain.