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Theological Observer

THE LENGTH OF THE DAYS OF CREATION

Some theologians of the early church taught that the days of creation were equivalent to moments since God's omnipotence did not require a full day to accomplish His creative purpose in each case cited in Genesis 1. In the nineteenth century, on the other hand, some exegetes proposed the opposite extreme, interpreting the days of creation in Genesis 1 as long periods of time—embracing, indeed, millions of years. Although few living Old Testament scholars adhere to the age-day theory, laymen frequently propose the idea or ask whether such an interpretation be possible. When the age-day theory does resurface in contemporary scholarship, it is not in critical circles (where the presumption of biblical fallibility makes any accommodation of Genesis to modern “science” unnecessary), but rather among more conservative scholars (such as Gleason Archer and Derek Kidner).

Frequently the age-day theory serves as a transitory bridge to more consistent interpretations of Genesis 1 which see the whole chronology of Genesis as a mere literary device. (Especially fashionable now is the liturgical theory, which sees the author of Genesis 1 imposing on divine creation the anthropomorphic pattern of the Jewish week—six days of work yielding to one day of rest.) A case in point is the new attitude of Calvin College, an institution of the Christian Reformed Church, which used to confess a literal interpretation of Genesis 1 with one voice. Davis Young opened his attack on the traditional view with the age-day theory (claiming to have inherited it from the late Edward J. Young, the most famous conservative Old Testament scholar of this century), but over the course of the years he has espoused much more general reinterpretations of the early chapters of Genesis. Meanwhile, his colleague Howard Van Till has in recent research (*The Fourth Day*) classified these chapters as a form of literature treating the creation of the world in an artistic, rather than a scientific, manner. Young, Van Till, and a like-minded colleague, Clarence Menninga, have, to be sure, encountered considerable resistance in the Christian Reformed Church. Nevertheless, when the Board of Trustees of Calvin College published the results of a year-long investigation of these professors, the verdict was predictable: no problem! Finding that the thinking of all three fell within the bounds of denominational doctrine, the board contented itself with warning Van Till against calling “into question either the event character or the revelational meaning of biblical history” (February 12, 1988).

In conservative Lutheran circles, too, the interpretation of Genesis 1 continues to concern people. In particular, most pastors have to answer questions about the length of the creative days with some frequency. Indeed, in the last issue of the *Lutheran Witness* (107:9) [September 1988], p. 22) a query of this nature appeared in the question-and-answer box. Requesting "the current stand of the LCMS," the questioner asked what "the church" says about the six days of creation. The answer consisted in a citation of the relevant article of the *Brief Statement of the Doctrinal Position of the Missouri Synod*, which begins with this affirmation: "We teach that God has created heaven and earth, and that in the manner and in the space of time recorded in the Holy Scriptures, especially Genesis 1 and 2, namely, by His almighty creative word and in six days." A true Lutheran, of course, wants to know not only what his church teaches, but also why—in other words, what Scripture teaches. The *Brief Statement* itself proceeds to this telling point: "Since no man was present when it pleased God to create the world, we must look for a reliable account of creation to God's own book, the Bible." In the face of continuing questions concerning the duration of the hexaemeron, we must be "ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh. . . a reason" of the faith within us. In actuality, the Word of God requires us to interpret the days of creation as days of ordinary length and, correspondingly, to repudiate all contrary views, whether they shorten these days or lengthen them.

(1) There is no doubt that the word *yōm*, which Genesis 1 uses to denote each of the six days of creation (verses 5, 8, 13, 19, 23, 31), ordinarily means a day of what we should call twenty-four hours. But it is a basic rule essential to the understanding of Scripture that the meaning of a word in a certain passage of Scripture must be equated with the common meaning of the word unless the context or the analogy of faith compel the exegete to accept a different meaning. Some have, indeed, contended that the context indicates a deviation from the normal usage of *yōm* (a) by using the word also for the days prior to the creation of the sun, (b) by using the word also for the "seventh day" of Genesis 2 (verses 3-4), which is supposedly still in progress, and (c) by ascribing to the sixth day events which supposedly could not fit into twenty-four hours (1:24-31; 2).

These arguments, however, are invalidated by the following considerations: (a) The first assertion is simply a *non sequitur*. It is true that God waited until the fourth day (1:14-18) to form distinct bodies (sun, moon, and stars) from the previously formless mass of heavenly matter from which light had been emanating since the first day (1:3). This fact, however, has no bearing upon the question of the

length of the days of creation. The point is that the context does not require us to think that the duration of the first three days was any different than the duration of any day since the creation of the sun as a distinct entity. The first three days are described in exactly the same way as the latter three, including the specification that in the course of each day dusk came to the part on the globe which the light first illuminated and, after a period of darkness, a dawn came which provided the transition to the following day (verses 5, 8, 13, 19, 23, 31). There is nothing in the context of Genesis 1 that would require us to lengthen either the first three days in particular or any of the six days in general.

(b) As to the appeal to the “seventh day” of Genesis 2 to justify a metaphorical interpretation of “day” in Genesis 1, we should deny the premise that the seventh day lasted longer than a solar day. The idea that the “seventh day” continues throughout history is quite specious. The seventh day is not wrapped up with the same formula as the preceding six days for the simple reason that the seventh day was not one of the days of creation. The Hebrew of Genesis 2:3 uses the perfect form *shābhath* to indicate (in the context of a historical narrative) that God’s rest was a distinct act completed in the past, not the imperfect form to indicate a continuous resting.

(c) As to the events ascribed by the first two chapters of Genesis to the sixth day of creation, we see no problem. There is no necessity of assuming that the various events consumed more than a few minutes in each case (although, of course, some may have taken more time). The only exception to this assertion would be the naming of animals by Adam (2:19-20). Not every kind of animal, however, much less every species, received a name from Adam at this time, but only “the birds of the heavens” and “the beasts of the field” (which is only one category of “the beasts of the earth,” 1:25) and presumably only their various general *mīnīm* (cf. 1:25) as opposed to individual species. Adam at this time was in communion with God, in harmony with the creatures which he was to name, and in possession of powers of reason which far surpass our own. The choice, therefore, of suitable names for the various kinds of animals brought to him by God need not have consumed much time.

(2) Although *yōm* is frequently modified by an ordinal numeral in the Old Testament, in no such instance is there any reason at all to think that *yōm* means anything but a day of ordinary length. But the word *yōm* is modified by an ordinal numeral five times in Genesis 1 to enumerate the days of creation (verses 8, 13, 19, 23, 31). Likewise, the cardinal numeral *ḥād* (“one”) is ordinarily attached to the word

yōm in order to emphasize the reference to a distinct period of twenty-four hours (e.g., Numbers 11:19; 1 Samuel 9:15). But in the one case in which an ordinal numeral is not used to enumerate one of the days of creation in Genesis 1 (namely, the first day) the word *ehād* serves this purpose. If, therefore, we interpret Genesis 1 in accord with the ordinary grammatical usage of Old Testament Hebrew as one ought to do, we must understand the days of creation as days of ordinary length.

(3) There is no evidence that *yōm* ever means an era. Such a meaning is not recognized by Hebrew lexicographers (cf. F. Brown, S.R. Driver, and C.A. Briggs, eds., *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1907, pp. 398-401). Therefore, even critical scholars would agree that the author of Genesis meant to teach his readers that the universe was created in six days of ordinary length—although such critics would, of course, feel free to regard the testimony of Genesis 1 as fallacious in this respect.

It is true that *yōm* may be used to denote the light part of a twenty-four hour period ("day" as opposed to "night"; Gen. 1:5, 14, 16, 18) and it is used in certain phrases to denote a specific point in time. Thus, when prefixed with the prepositional *beth* (*b^eyōm*) and used with a demonstrative pronoun or in a construct chain, it means idiomatically "at the time," "when" (e.g., Gen. 2:4). When used in a construct chain with an entity or abstraction, *yōm* denotes a specific time (not necessarily the same time in each passage) in which the entity or abstraction or something connected with it comes into prominence in a special way or degree. Thus, the "day of trouble" (Ps. 20:1) is any particularly troublous time in a person's life. The phrase "the day of the Lord" refers to a particular time (the particular point in time differing from passage to passage) when the wrath or the grace of God comes into more prominence (at least to believers) than at other times. In all such phrases, however, *yōm*, if not meaning a twenty-four hour day, is used to designate "time at which," or "time when," rather than "time during which." Therefore, *yōm* never assumes the sense of "era." If God and Moses had wished to describe each act of creation as consuming an era, they would have used either *yāmīm* with suitable modification (e.g., the adjective *rabbīm*) or, more likely, a completely different word (e.g., *dōr*).

The appeal which some unfamiliar with literary usage have made to Psalm 90:4 and 2 Peter 3:8 in no way invalidates the position taken on the meaning of *yōm* in general (much less in Genesis 1 in

particular). Conceding only for the sake of argument the bearing of 2 Peter 3:8 (which, of course, uses the Greek word *hēmera*) on the usage of a Hebrew word, both it and Psalm 90 are obviously similes. In Psalm 90 *yōm* is prefixed with a prepositional *kaph*, meaning “like”; and Peter twice uses the corresponding Greek word, *hōs* (the figurative nature of the assertion being underlined in this latter case by the use of *hōs* in the converse statement in the last part of the verse: “and a thousand years is like one day”). The point of 2 Peter 3:8 is that God chooses exactly the right time (*kairos*) for the accomplishment of His purposes, whether it be tomorrow or in another millennium or whenever. In Genesis 1, however, the prefix *kaph* does not occur with *yōm*, and so there can be no question of the pertinent phrases being similes. Nor is there any justification for positing any other figure of speech in these phrases. The fact, moreover, that Psalm 90:4 and 2 Peter 3:8 are similes means, of course, that they cannot be used as proof that *yōm* can mean a thousand years (much less an era of millions of years) any more than one could argue from the clause “though your sins be like scarlet” (Isaiah 1:18) that the word *ḥattā’th* (“sin”) could mean “scarlet.” The point of Psalm 90:4 is that even a millennium is an insignificant amount of time in comparison with the eternity of God’s existence.

(4) In each case the days of Genesis 1 consisted in a period of light and a period of darkness. Verse 5 states that, after the initial creation of light in the course of the first day of time, dusk came (“and there was darkness,” *erebh*) to the part of the globe which the light first illuminated. Then, after a period of darkness, dawn came (“and there was morning”—*bhōqer*, the point at which light penetrates the darkness), which brought an end to “one day” and began the second day. The same occurrence of a new dawn provides the transition to each of the following days of the creation week (verses 8, 13, 19, 23, 31).

(5) The framework of Genesis 1 is intensely chronological, marked by a methodical sequence of time periods and punctuated by the same recurring phrases defining these periods (verses 5, 8, 13, 19, 23, 31). The chronological interest of the account is likewise evident from verse 14, which states that the sun was created on the fourth day “for signs and for seasons and for days and for years,” in which *yāmim* obviously refers to solar days. But the interpretation of any word or assertion must accord with its context unless the analogy of faith compels the exegete to accept a different interpretation. Consequently, the word *yōm*, when used to denote the days of creation in Genesis 1, must be understood in the strict chronological sense of a twenty-four hour period.

(6) Exodus 20:8-11 lays this injunction upon the Israelites: "(8) Remember the sabbath day to keep it holy. (9) Six days shalt thou labour, and do all thy work. (10) But the seventh day is the sabbath of the Lord thy God; in it thou shalt not do any work, thou, nor thy son, nor thy daughter, thy manservant, nor thy maidservant, nor thy cattle, nor thy stranger that is within thy gates. (11) For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is, and rested the seventh day; wherefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and hallowed it." These verses clearly treat the days of creation as days of ordinary length. In the first place, it would be a gross violation of the contextual principle of exegesis to assign a different meaning to the word *yāmim* in verse 11 than in the preceding verse unless the analogy of faith were to require such a change (which, of course, it does not do). Secondly, the "day of the Sabbath" (v. 8) or "seventh day" (v. 10) or "Sabbath" (v. 10) which the Israelites are to treat as holy (v. 8), dedicating it to the Lord and doing no work on it (v. 10), is clearly identified with the "seventh day" or "day of the Sabbath" on which the Lord rested from the work of creation and which He therefore blessed and treated as holy (referring back to Genesis 2:2-3). Thirdly, this passage occurs as a commandment in the prime locus of legislation in all of Scripture, the decalogue. In such a legal context, a figurative use of the word *yōm* is especially unlikely. As previously stated, then, Exodus 20 clearly treats the days of creation as days of ordinary length; and since the same God is the primary author of Genesis 1 and Exodus 20 and, indeed, since the same prophet, Moses, is the secondary author of both chapters, we must accept the exegesis of Exodus 20 as infallible, admitting of no appeal.

(7) Those who propose to interpret the days of creation in Genesis 1 as eras admit that this idea would not have occurred to the author and original audience of Genesis. Such a position, however, negates the essential hermeneutical rule that the one meaning of a given word in any one grammatical connection is the signification intended by the author and, indeed, this one meaning is the signification understood by the original audience unless the context or the analogy of faith require the exegete to accept a different meaning (which, of course, neither does in this case).

(8) Even those who propose to interpret the days of creation in Genesis 1 as eras often admit that this interpretation springs not from any testimony of Scripture but rather from an evolutionary theory of origins. In the first place, however, the interpretation of *yōm* as "era" fails to harmonize evolutionary thought with Scripture since evolutionists do not accept the same order of origin as Genesis 1 records (e.g., birds in an era before land animals or plants in an era

before the formation of the sun). Secondly, Genesis 1 excludes the evolution of one *mīn* ("kind") of plant or animal into another (vv. 11-12, 21, 24-25). Thirdly, to interpret Genesis 1 on the basis of modern evolutionary theory is to overthrow the *sola scriptura* principle of theology. For, by virtue of its divine authorship (*suggestio verborum*), Holy Scripture constitutes the sole legitimate source and norm of doctrine; consequently, no external evidence may be used to change the otherwise apparent understanding of any assertion of Scripture.

Douglas McC. Lindsay Judisch