



the text of Genesis 1. These include the creation is God centered (he is the only one who does/says anything), perfect and complete (seen by the use of the number 7), and focuses on humanity as the pinnacle of creation (seen by the symmetry of days 1-3 and days 4-6, which focus on day 6 and 3, and which end on humanity with an extended commentary of day 6).<sup>3</sup> The way Moses has written seems to focus not on a chronology of events as much, but rather to bring out these points above.

And yet even if Genesis 1 is particularly stylized and crafted, in a semi-poetic/semi-narrative, it does *not* mean that this is *not* history. It does not mean this is just made up. Rather the author (Moses) is crafting it in such a way to make a point about the history. Jesus does similarly when he summarizes centuries of history of the parable of the wicked tenants (Mt. 21:33-41). He uses a made up story (a parable) to tell of real history.

In addition the use of the word 'day' makes us question if it is the author was writing in a literal way (6 x 24hour days) or in a stylized way. There appears to be 3 different uses of the Hebrew word for 'day' (*yom*) in 1:1-2:4.

1. In v5a the word 'day' is used to describe the daylight or day time in contrast to the night or night time, so roughly a 12 hour period..
2. In v5b the word 'day' is used to describe' the first day' – i.e. the time period involving the daylight and the night-time or a 24 hour period.
3. In 2:4 (NIV leaves the word 'day' out. Literally Genesis 2:4 These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created. In the day that the LORD God made the earth and the heavens {RSV}). The word 'day' is used to describe the whole period of the 6 days in which God has created the heavens and the earth.

What this implies is that the passage is not meant to be read 'literalistically' (a 'wooden' meaning where the genre of writing and literary techniques are not taken into account) like a science text-book or construction manual. However, the passage is a work of literature where the words need to be read according to the type of literature. That is, according to the genre of writing and the literary tools employed. The passage is not interested so much in the mechanics of chronology and scientific method, but is primarily a theological work telling us 'why' creation occurred, and 'by whom' and 'for what' purpose.

How we understand what type of literature Gen 1-2 are, affects how we understand what the author of Genesis is trying to say (and that is what we are trying to find out).

If we are trying to understand the literature, do we not worry about science at all?

#### 4. Place of science and different views

There are two poles that some Christians will take with science and one that tries to join them.

i. **Literal interpretation.** It sees that science has so many mistakes that it's not worth trusting. This view believes that the bible states that Creation was in 6 literal 24 hour days. This view works out alternate scientific explanations of the history of the world that fits with this interpretation of the bible, because they judge present day scientific views as wrong.

The strength of this view is that it doesn't just accept science as always being right all the time. Too often people accept science as purely objective understanding of facts. But no science operates purely on facts. There is often underlying presuppositions (pre-held beliefs), and often 'theories' that are said to be absolute fact, have over time, been rejected as a better 'theory' comes along to explain the data we can record. And it is true that often science has been held up as so true, that it becomes another 'religion' that explains all truth to humanity. In addition, science that often depends on repeatable experiments, cannot use this method when working out the *history* of the universe (which is not repeatable).

However, some care is needed with this approach. To show that every science theory is wrong, one should show that scientist's pre-held beliefs are the cause for their wrong understanding of the facts. Also, a better theory

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<sup>3</sup> Day 3 and 6 are highlighted by the double use of 'and God saw that it was good'. Day 6 is much longer than the other days. In addition the formula 'And God said... and there was' is changed with day 6. In v26-28 God deliberates: 'let us make man..., so God created'. And then God talks to man in v28. The point is that humanity's importance is highlighted by the way Moses has made a pattern in the chapter, and deviates from pattern with humanity. The crafting of the chapters is there to make this point.

should be shown in place of common held scientific beliefs. In addition, often those with anti-science views forget that within science there is much mutual criticism, as scientist consider, weigh and then accept or reject others (often rivals in the competition of science) ideas, based on the research. This rivalry amongst scientists helps stop excessive false scientific ideas and theories. Also, when there is agreement of a specific idea among thousands of researches, it should make us weary of rejecting them too easily (especially when we are not scientists and have a lay-understanding of much of what is being said). And when identical conclusions are reached *independently*, by different scientist, it adds weight to some of the scientists' theories.

Sometimes it also feels like anti-scientists have so focused on the literal 24 hour 6 day creation, that it leads this viewpoint to filter out *anything* that doesn't agree with it (including other possible faithful readings of the text of Genesis), even if the evidence is very strong.

A serious question to ask of this interpretation is this: does the text *demand*s a literal interpretation? This is not a question about if God could create in 6 days, or if science says otherwise. But as we deal with the text itself, does it demand that we must read it literalistically (i.e. as 24 x 6 days)? Science may play a servant role in challenging a literal way we read the text. This then makes us think have we read the text itself rightly. Are there other faithful ways of reading the text in the way the author (not science) would have wanted us to understand it? Is there use of figurative language in the text?

And what we must do is get rid of a deep-seated feeling once and for all that figurative language would be inferior to literal language, as somewhat less worthy of God. **Just because something is taken literally, doesn't mean it is right.** We need to work out what the author is saying. If he is using figurative language to make a point, and we take it literalistically, we have *misunderstood* the author. E.g. when Jesus talks of Herod being a fox, to make a point about his character, if we stand on our moral hobby horse and say: literal is best, and so believe Jesus was talking about a fury creature with pointy nose and fluffy tail, we have missed what Jesus meant, and so have done a disservice with God. **The question should always be: what did the author mean?**

ii. Another view is **harmony between Scriptures and modern science**. It sees that Genesis' presentation agrees with much of science, which it is said, makes sense, since the world is God's too, and would agree with what he's written in the Bible. Both the world (and science) and the Bible are God's Truth. This view favorably understands science. The heart of this argument revolves around the way to understand 'day' in Genesis 1. It is not taken as 24 hours, but indefinite or considerable time (like in Ps 90:4, Isa 4:2). This is strengthened by seeing that the 7<sup>th</sup> day does not end with the 'there was evening and there was morning'. However, the agreement with scientific view is not as easy as it seems. First, the problem of unequal duration of the 'day/eras'. Difference in order of details. Also on day 3, trees precede marine organisms (day 5), and birds (day 5) precede insects (day 6). Scientists think the opposite. In addition, definitively, the sun and stars are created on Day 4, after the earth and its vegetation, even after trees!

However, it sometimes seems that this view asks too much of the text of Genesis 1-2. It seems to read *into* the text our modern scientific ideas, of which the human authors would not have known.

iii. Another view is by **separating the realm of faith from that of science**. It is said the Bible is not a textbook on geology or anthropology (about humanity). The opening chapters are concerned with faith, not how the universe was created. It's about religious truth, not historical truth.

Now it is true that there is a difference between science and faith. And that God is distinct from the world, and that our faith in him is the most important aspect of the bible, rather than how he made the world. And Genesis is forced, if it is trying to answer our scientific questions of the origin of the universe.

However being different doesn't mean they are completely separate. It is true the bible is not a handbook of science. But that does not mean it will have *nothing* to say in the realm of the universe and science. Just because the primary purpose of Genesis is not to teach us in geology, does not mean it doesn't have anything to say about science. We can't completely separate science and theology, since theology has to do with everything, precisely because everything was created by God and continues to depend on him. Another way it is said: faith rests on facts. Bible teaching is based on history.

**iv.** The last view is a *literary interpretation*.

Before we see this, we firstly consider the place of science in our interpretation. We should not uphold science as always right and true. And we shall devote ourselves primarily to the understanding of God's Word. Yet we will not reject sciences theories outright. Yet, what is the proper place of the sciences?

**What is the proper place of sciences in interpretation?**

What our culture says will affect our reading of the Bible. But should they? Or should we always try to forget what outside sources say at all, so we can get the pure signal of Scripture?

We can say that the Bible must not be placed under any other authority. We cannot compromise here. Even if science comes to so called 'facts', they are still fallible (imperfect), and they are not of the authority of God's Word to us.

Any outside source should have a *ministerial, servant-role* if possible. If fact, no interpretation can develop in a vacuum. All interpretation appeals to the services of knowledge we had before. In order to understand the text of the Bible we use our knowledge of language and also the reality that each word in the text points to. For example, when we read that the story of Jotham, when it make the trees talk (see Judges 9:7 ff), we know straight away that it is a fable, because we know (from knowledge of reality) that trees do not talk. Our knowledge about trees plays a *servant-role*. It helps us work out the literary genre and therefore the meaning. Similar with science. The knowledge we get from observing reality (science) would help us understand the *language* of the Bible better.

The problem comes when the servant (science) turns into the authority. Under the concept of 'making use of our proper knowledge of reality' (e.g. using science), we can impose science onto the text to silence it. E.g.: 'we know very well that..., *therefore* God did not mean this or that. This is putting the text under our supposed other knowledge. E.g. 'We know that the genesis of the cosmos took millions of years, *therefore* the 'seven days' must be taken allegorically (i.e. not literal 7 days)'. You could do this with the resurrection of Jesus too. We know that the dead don't come back to life, *therefore* Jesus must have come back from the dead only metaphorically speaking.

A helpful principle for us to consider is what the human author of the text could know. E.g. with genesis, it is not possible for him to know what we are taught by astronomers, geologists and other scientist. So we should not try to put a modern scientific view into the interpretation. The interpretation must stay solely to the text and its context. The sciences may play a servant role, but the sciences are outside the text. The sciences will stimulate the interpreter, from outside the text, driving him/her to validate his/her understanding of the text and to test the evidence. Thus sciences will not have authority, nor even a *substantial* ministerial role within interpretation.

**They act as warnings and confirmations at a later stage.**

**5. A literary interpretation.**

This method of interpretation is not new, and just a result of interaction with modern science. Augustine (400s AD) had a literary interpretation, and so have many others through the centuries.

The literary interpretation understands the form of the 'week' to be a form that has been arranged by the author to make his points. It is not to supply us with a chronology of origins. It is possible that the logical order he has chosen coincides broadly with the actual sequence of the facts, but that does not interest him. He wishes to bring out his theology, and the way he writes helps him do that (just as John's gospel does, by putting certain events in certain places, and including certain things while excluding others John 20:30-31, and not different chronology of events to the synoptic gospels). The author of Genesis wants us to understand how the creation is related to God and what its significance for humanity is.

This method also overcomes a number of 'problems' of other interpretations.

- It doesn't have a problem between the different order in chapter 1 and chapter 2 of certain events. In v11, on day 3 God makes the trees and plants. But in chapter 2 which describes the creation of man (2:7, which we know happened on day 6 – in 1:24-31), verse 5 says there was no plants. Thus chapter 1 and 2 don't agree with each other. It seems that chapter 1 is not necessarily just a sequence of events.
- Nor is there a problem of creation of sun and stars being created after the land and trees.
- How we have light on the first day. And how we have evening and morning (end v5), if there was no sun.

- Also if it was a literal 6 x 24 hr days, day 7 poses a problem in that we are not told that that day ended, with the 'there was evening and morning'. As Augustine concluded, that day never ended, we are still in the 7<sup>th</sup> day.

Now this doesn't mean that it is right, just because of the above, since we don't just believe something because it's convenient. But it helps us consider that it could be. The question is: does the text lead us in that direction?

And it appears that it does. There is a significant amount of styling to the text that seems not to be concerned with chronology. There is some movement from one day to the next. And in the Hebrew, it has a movement: this happened,.... And then happened.

And yet there are also poetic elements in the Hebrew. Throughout the chapter, the number 7 is very very prominent. There are multiples. The first line has 7 words. The second line has 2 lots of 7 words. In the first line, *God, heavens and earth*, are repeated thru the chapter in multiples of 7s. The end refrain: and it was so, is said 7 times. As is: and God saw it was good. There are 7 days. The point is, that this chapter has been crafted in certain way. It is not just a story of this happened and this happened. It also has some feel of poetry.

In addition, we see the clear way that the chapter has been divided up with symmetry.

	Forming the world		Filling the world
Day 1	Light in sky (v3)	Day 4	Sun, moon, stars (v14)
Day 2	Sky and sea (v6)	Day 5	Birds and fish (v20)
Day 3	Land (v11)	Day 6	Animals and man (v24)

Day 7 Rest

The first 3 days show the separation of spaces. The second 3 days show the filling of these spaces.

And we see this structure emphasized b/c at day 3 and day 6 there is a double: and God say it was good (v10, v12, v26, v31).

In summary, it seems that Moses was trying to structure chapter 1 using literary devices. He does not seem as focused on providing a chronology or sequence of events of the origin of the universe. He has crafted the chapter to explain his theology.

If you are interested in hearing a talk that explains this meaning more, go to [www.northernlakes.com.au](http://www.northernlakes.com.au) for the sermon on Genesis 1.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Also see Henri Blocher, *In the Beginning*, translated D. G. Preston., IVP Illinois, especially chapters 1 and 2, and the appendix.