



CHRISTIAN ANSWERS TO HARD QUESTIONS

**CHRISTIAN
INTERPRETATIONS
OF GENESIS 1**

VERN S. POYTHRESS

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Christian Interpretations of Genesis 1

Christianity and the Role of Philosophy

Creation, Evolution, and Intelligent Design

The Morality of God in the Old Testament

Should You Believe in God?

Was Jesus Really Born of a Virgin?

Peter A. Lillback and Steven T. Huff, Series Editors

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DAYS OF GENESIS 1

How do the early chapters of Genesis relate to the claims of modern science? Mainstream science claims that the earth is about 4.5 billion years old and that the universe as a whole is about 14 billion years old. Genesis 1 describes the creation of the world in six days. Is there a contradiction?

People interested in the relationship between science and Genesis have been considering these questions for more than a century.¹ They have come up with not merely one but a whole host of possible explanations. It helps us to be familiar with the possibilities so that we do not too quickly adopt one explanation without considering alternatives.

A Dismissive Approach

To begin with, some people take a dismissive approach to the question. They do not believe that the Bible is really God's own Word, but treat it as merely an ancient human book of religion. According to their view, it is merely mistaken in what it says about the origin of the universe. But we do not think that such an approach does justice to the Bible's claims. So we will consider explanations that attempt to give a positive, respectful interpretation of Genesis 1.

The most obvious division among alternative explanations involves the lengths of the days mentioned in Genesis 1. If the lengths were to be measured, would the days come out the same length as modern twenty-four-hour days? And what are the consequences for our interpretation?

Young-Earth Creationism, with Adjustments to Science

A good number of people, including scientists associated with the Institute for Creation Research, think the earth and

the universe are thousands of years old, rather than billions of years old. They understand Genesis 1 to be speaking about twenty-four-hour days. Then what do they say about the claims of modern mainstream science? Some of them undertake to challenge and revise the dating claims made in mainstream science. This approach is often called the *twenty-four-hour-day* theory. But the label is not completely satisfactory, since other theories as well maintain that the days were twenty-four hours long.

The Mature-Creation Theory

Consider next the theory called *mature creation*. It takes its cue from the creation of Adam and Eve. It understands Genesis 2 to be saying that Adam and Eve were created *mature*, rather than growing gradually from babies to adults. If a scientist had been present and had examined Adam and Eve immediately after they were created, he might have estimated their age at twenty-two to twenty-five years, let us say. The age estimate would represent *apparent age* rather than their actual age. In addition, the garden of Eden, as described in Genesis 2:6–9, would have had mature trees. The trees would have had rings in their trunks. By counting rings, a scientist would again arrive at an *apparent age*.

Suppose the scientist examined Adam's eyes and skin and teeth. Would he find incoherent or coherent ages? Would he find that everything came out to about twenty-two to twenty-five years old? Or would he find nine years old for eyes, eighty years old for skin, and thirty years old for teeth? If we believe in the God of the Bible, who is sovereign in creation, we have to say that detailed decisions about how to create Adam are up to God. He can do as he pleases. Nevertheless, one of the options is certainly to produce coherent maturity, that is, coherent appearance of age.

If some things, such as Adam and Eve and trees, were created mature, we may wonder whether the whole universe was created mature. If it was mature, it might in fact be *coherently mature*. If so, the age estimates from modern science, such as 4.5 billion years for the earth and 14 billion years for the universe, are simply coherent instances of apparent age. According to this understanding, the whole universe was created only a few thousand years ago. But it was created with coherent maturity, so that the coherence in scientific explanations of age has a simple explanation.²

The Revelatory-Day Theory

Next, the *revelatory-day* theory says that the six days are six days in which God successively *revealed* to the author of Genesis the truths recorded in Genesis 1. The days in question are days organizing the timing of *revelation* rather than the timing of the *acts of creation*.

The Gap Theory

The *gap* theory says that there is a gap in time between Genesis 1:1 and 1:2. Genesis 1:1 describes the original creation by God. Verse 2 describes a subsequent catastrophe. Verses 3–31 describe a subsequent re-creation. This approach was popularized in the notes to the Scofield Bible (1909; revised 1917).³ According to this view, the results of modern scientific investigation are to be fitted into the time between verses 1 and 3.

The Local-Creation Theory

In a manner similar to the gap theory, the *local-creation* theory says that the original acts of creation take place in Genesis 1:1, while verse 2 describes a cataclysmic devastation in the ancient Near East. The re-creation described in verses 3–31 takes place in a *local area* in the Near East.

The Intermittent-Day Theory

The *intermittent-day* theory says that the days in Genesis 1 are twenty-four hours long, but that there are gaps in time between the days. Much of the creative activity of God takes place within these gaps.

BEFORE WE MOVE ON

- ✦ What sets the revelatory-day theory apart from other theories discussed thus far? What is distinctive about young-earth creationism?
- ✦ How might the creation of Adam and Eve lead us to believe that the whole universe was created mature? What is meant by *coherent maturity* versus *incoherent maturity*?
- ✦ How do the gap theory, local-creation theory, and intermittent-day theory incorporate time gaps into the creation account?

The Day-Age Theory

Now we will consider approaches that do not consider the days in Genesis 1 to be necessarily twenty-four hours long. The first such view is the *day-age* theory. The day-age theory says that each “day” in Genesis 1 is a long period of time—it may correspond to whole geologic ages, rather than being merely twenty-four hours long. The day-age theory customarily appeals to the fact that the Hebrew word for *day* (*yom*) can be used in a range of ways:

1. The period of light: “God called the light *Day*” (Gen. 1:5).
2. The period of light and darkness together (twenty-four hours): “Do not eat or drink for three *days*, night or day” (Esth. 4:16).
3. A time of unspecified length that has distinctive character: “In the *day* that the LORD God made the earth and the heavens”

Scholar of science and theology Vern Poythress examines which of the contemporary interpretations of Genesis are most consistent with scientific evidence and careful biblical interpretation. He presents the case for young-earth creationism, mature creation, the day-age theory, the analogical-day theory, and the framework hypothesis to see which of them stand up to scrutiny.

"Though brief, this booklet is informed, irenic, and instructive. It covers all the bases in an extremely readable style, and all sides to this dialogue should find it helpful. I highly recommend it."
—J. P. Moreland, Distinguished Professor of Philosophy, Talbot School of Theology, Biola University, La Mirada, California; Author of *Love Your God with All Your Mind*

Written to equip and strengthen laypeople in their defense of the faith, *Christian Answers to Hard Questions* challenges contemporary opposition to Christianity with concise, practical answers.

Peter A. Lillback and Steven T. Huff, Series Editors

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