

The Garden Story Never Happened. The Garden Story Always Happens.

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Is the earth really billions of years old? For some theologians this question is crucial. Greg Boyd (*Inspired Imperfection*) recalled a pastor once saying, "If the earth wasn't created in six literal days, then the whole Bible may as well be a book of lies." There are many Christians who (incorrectly) share such [an all or nothing](#) philosophy when it comes to the Bible but we must be careful not to confuse our own interpretation of Scripture with Scripture.

There are three main Christian interpretive philosophies when it comes to the [two creation accounts](#) in Genesis. Since the Bible is God's word and is believed to narrate six days of creation, **young-earth creationists** tell us the earth cannot be billions of years old. Using Biblical genealogies the earth is usually thought to have been created about 6,000 years ago. Not only did dinosaurs and humans coexist but all the animals we see in the fossil record were contemporaneous with humans. This view is combined with belief in a global flood in Genesis and flood geology which is where all these buried animal fossils are said to have come from.

Old-earth creationists, on the other hand, recognize the overwhelming evidence for the antiquity of the earth and instead interpret the days in Genesis as long epochs. The earth is said to be 4.5 billion years old and Biblical Genealogies are often considered incomplete meaning Adam and Eve and the flood can be pushed back tens of thousands of years prior. This crowd tends to recognize the insurmountable difficulties with a global flood and proposes a localized interpretation of it.

Both schools of thought will attempt to offer grammatical and exegetical arguments justifying their respective interpretations. Old-earth creationists have the better argument in terms of pure science. Things like radiometric dating, the transit times of light and earth's geological features clearly demonstrate a very ancient earth. Not only that but science and logistical arguments are strongly antithetical to a global deluge. Unfortunately, a great deal of old-earth creationists believe evolution did not happen and their attempted harmonization of Genesis 1 with modern science is shown to be incorrect on that basis alone. In terms of pure exegesis and interpretation, young-earth creationists appear to have the advantage. The Genesis flood is [best understood as universal](#) since it echoes and undoes the creative order established earlier

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Section 7: Days vs Epochs: Why I am a Wooden Literalist When it Comes to Genesis 1.

and the “days” in Genesis 1 are probably best understood as actual days given the account is and etiology for the sabbath, amongst other things (see below).

Both groups of exegetes are proponents of what is called of **Biblical Concordism**. A concordist, very generally, is a “literalist” who believes whatever the Bible plainly says must concord with reality as we know it. Such interpreters do believe the Bible can have different genres and is capable of metaphors and other literary features but claim Genesis is narrated as a description of things that happened in the past. Since the Bible is written by God and God is omniscient, incapable of errors and unable to lie, it must be absolutely true and nothing science says, when properly understood, could ever actually go against it. If science runs contrary to scripture either our scientific understanding or our interpretation of scripture is incorrect. Scripture is often given priority over other modes of knowledge. Henry Morris wrote the following: "But the main reason for insisting on the universal flood as a fact of history and as the primary vehicle for geological interpretation is that God's word plainly teaches it! No geologic difficulties, real or imagined, can be allowed to take precedence over the clear statements and necessary inference of Scripture." For some overly-literal concordists, one gets the impression that if the Bible told us the sun was made out of cheese and yogurt, we might expect a response of, “God said it and that settles it.” This may be unfair, however, as there are many verses in the Bible which are unashamedly geocentric, yet such exegetes have mostly come to grips with these.

A third type of interpretation of the days in Genesis is provided by those who subscribe to Divine or **Biblical Accommodation**. Proponents of accommodation believe God spoke through the worldview and cosmogony of ancient Israelites. God did not feel the need to correct mistaken scientific beliefs as those issues were not germane to His purposes. Longman and Walton (*Lost World of the Flood*) write, “The Bible was written for us, but not to us. We have no reason to believe that God gave ancient authors special knowledge of perspectives on geology, cosmology, astronomy, or any other scientific information beyond that known at the time. Nor do we have any reason to think that God embedded such information in the human author’s writings beyond the latter’s conscious knowledge.” This view is possible since God is sovereign and can speak to us how He chooses but is also necessitated by the fact that we know God did not make such corrections in many other parts of scripture. For example, the Bible refers to the four corners of the earth (Is. 11:12), think thoughts come from our kidneys (Psalm 16:7), believes there is a solid firmament in the sky (Gen 1:6, Job 37:18), proclaims much to the chagrin of Galileo, the earth is immutable and does not move (1 Chron 16:30; Ps 93:1, 96:10, 104:5; Is 45:8), that the earth is flat (Mt 4:8, Dan 4:10-11), stars are small and close enough to the earth they can fall from the sky and land on it (Rev 6:13-16, 8:10; Mt 2:10, 24:29; Dan 8:10) and so on. God is very much okay with using phenomenological language when it comes to things like “sunrise” and accommodating the beliefs of his people to speak truth through them and move salvation history in the direction He wants. John Calvin once opined that people who thought the earth moved were possessed by the devil but we can forgive him of this understandable error and instead focus on a wonderful snippet of his commentary on Psalm 136, “The Holy Spirit had no intention to teach astronomy; and, in proposing instruction meant to be common to the simplest and most uneducated persons, he made use by Moses and the other Prophets of popular language, that none might shelter himself under the pretext of

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obscurity . . . the Holy Spirit would rather speak childishly than unintelligibly to the humble and unlearned." God accommodated his message through time-conditioned revelation. Interacting with people on their level in their own culture, with ideas they can understand seems the most effective method of communication to me and God has to condescend himself no matter how he communicates with us sinful human beings.

What this means is that to interpret Genesis correctly, we must understand the worldview and get as close to the mindset of its author as possible. Otherwise we miss the inferences ancient audiences would have made based on shared life-settings and cultural context. With that being said, we are now in a position to resolve the issue of what the "days" in Genesis might mean according to proponents of Biblical accommodation. But first let us quickly answer a different question.

Is Genesis True?

I believe Genesis 1 is a wonderfully true story in what it teaches about the form and function of the world and the nature of God. I do not view its literary genre as history though. It is much closer to ancient poetry and part of its purpose is in correcting the mistaken mythologies of Israel's neighbors and exalting the one true God in a time when polytheism was the norm. The story is from a pre-scientific era and has no modern interest in the scientific age of the earth. It cannot resolve the 24 hour vs epoch debate because it has no knowledge of it. It doesn't care about it. If you look closely at it a very discernable pattern emerges. The events on days 1 and 4, 2 and 5 and 3 and 6 all correspond very well with one another. On day one light is created, on day four the sun and moon. On day two the waters above and below are separated and on day four fish and birds are created (creatures below and above). Day three separates the dry land from the water and naturally land creatures arrive on day six. Days 1-3 are concerned with setting up what happens on days 4-6. The order and function of the world is due to God's purpose and careful planning. That is the point intended here. A point I absolutely affirm as 100% true.

Genesis 1 also establishes God's primacy and expresses Jewish monotheism. When we read it in light of other Ancient Mesopotamian creation stories, it plainly tells us God has no rivals, no prior lineage, there is a monopoly on power and only one true God. Unlike in the *Atrahasis* epic, God doesn't need a discussion amongst peers or the approval of anyone to create human beings. Humans weren't an afterthought! Unlike in the *Enuma Elish*, we weren't created after he proved himself defeating Tiamat the sea goddess in some cosmic struggle and gained the renown of the other gods. The sea monsters in Genesis 1:22 are just another part of God's good creation. There is no conflict mythology in Genesis because the author is plainly telling us God cannot gain what he never lacked and there has never been a challenger worthy of Him. A rise in power is not possible for one who has never not been in power. Bill Arnold writes of Genesis, "Israel's God has no rivals. There can be no struggle with forces opposed to his actions or corresponding to his power. There can be no victory enthronement motif because God's victory was never in doubt; rather, God has never *not* been enthroned. There can be no enthronement portrait here because God has not *become* sovereign; he has simply never been *less than* sovereign."

In its original context, the audience of Genesis 1 would have been aware of many features of Egyptian, Assyrian and Babylonian mythology. The absence of conflict mythology or an origin story

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for God would have clearly stood out to ancient readers and hearers of this story. Genesis tells us a great deal simply by not including these elements and comparing how it differs from other creation stories. It is in this context that Genesis 1 must be read and understood. From within this interpretive matrix, a clear statement of Jewish monotheism and the sovereignty of the Biblical God is given. That is the primary purpose of the first creation story bar none. I absolutely affirm Genesis is 100% correct on this point.

The Days in Genesis:

Genesis 1 is also an etiology for the sabbath and for that reason we probably should understand the “days” therein generally in the context of a human week. Etiologies were extremely common in antiquity and in the Bible itself. Since scripture is accommodated and does not intend to teach us science, and the form and function of the narrative in Genesis is clearly designed to teach theological truths to ancient audiences who would have understood these cultural references, there is no need to fuss over this. Genesis 1 is not interested in “twenty four hour periods” vs “long epochs.” That is a modern issue not at all relevant thousands of years ago. Just as one should not seek to learn quantum mechanics from a poetry text, this is imposing the wrong question on Genesis which explains the patterns and regularities of the observed world in terms of God’s creative work. So why the days? What is the author telling us besides what was delineated above? Genesis is expressing the importance of honoring the sabbath which is tied into the created order. Rather than worrying about the length of the days in Genesis and asking it questions to which it never intended to provide answers to, questions which are ultimately meaningless given its more poetic genre, we should be pointing out to our fellow brothers and sisters in the Lord that the importance of the Sabbath is as plainly taught as is Jewish monotheism or that humans were the climax of God’s creative work. Fussing over the meaning of “days” in Genesis might also allow us to conveniently neglect an important issue facing the Church today, why so many Christians no longer spend the sabbath devoted to honoring God. We certainly have no issues honoring capitalism on Sundays.

Why I Embrace Wooden Literalism when reading Genesis 1

Despite the fear of being accused of having a sensationalistic or clickbait-like title, as it turns out I feel I am a bit of a wooden-literalist when it comes to Genesis 1. I believe what the account is teaching us is absolutely true as written in its original context to its original audience based on how they would have understood it. However, I am not a Biblical concordist because I do believe Genesis 1 teaches us theological truth though some ancient cosmogony that we now know to be incorrect. For example, it *assumes* there is a solid firmament in the sky while *teaching* us about God’s care and providence in establishing the form and function of the natural world. To summarize what we learned of Genesis 1:

- It has zero interest in 24 hours vs long epochs.
- There is only one God (thus flouting polytheism which was the norm)
- God is sovereign. God alone has all the power and no rivals.
- God has always been sovereign and has never had rivals (no conflict mythology)
- The created order is due to God’s foresight and planning.
- Humans are the climax of God’s creation and given dominion over it as stewards.
- The Sabbath is of such immense importance to God that it is tied into the created order.

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