



Harry Lee Poe

Article

The English Bible and the Days of Creation: When Tradition Conflicts with Text

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The English Bible translation of Genesis 1 has framed the discussions and disagreements over science and religion in the West throughout the modern period. Regardless of the players' attitude toward God and the Bible, many assume that the Bible says that the universe was made in six consecutive solar days within one week. The problem with such an approach is that this idea cannot be found in the Hebrew text of Genesis. The Hebrew text does not have the definite article with the first five days of the week. Creation did not begin "the first day" but "one day." It did not continue on "the second day" but on "a second day," and so on until humans appear. In Genesis, the aspects of creation have six definite beginning points, but creation occurs over an indeterminate period of time. The Hebrew, Greek, and Latin texts do not introduce the definite article before day six, yet most English translations since the time of Wycliffe have added the definite article to the first five days.

Of all the controversies that arise between science and religion in the West, the pivotal issue for many of them involves how to read the first chapter of Genesis. Some people prefer a literal reading, whereas others prefer a symbolic reading. Both of these approaches, however, depend upon establishing how best to translate the Hebrew into modern English.

Enormous energy has gone into the debate over whether the Hebrew word *yom* should be translated *day* or *period of time*. For centuries, the debate has ignored the grammar of the first chapter and the other words in the first chapter. Ironically, *yom* probably was intended to mean a solar day in the first chapter of Genesis

while also allowing for an indeterminate time span between days that could be the approximate fourteen billion years that current cosmology suggests. In other words, while allowing that *yom* should be understood as a twenty-four-hour day, a literal reading of the text allows for a vast period of time that makes the option of a week of seven twenty-four-hour days highly problematic.

Each of the seven days of Genesis 1 clearly presents new things happening that had never happened before. This linear unfolding of the world would have contrasted starkly against the understanding of the ancient Near Eastern nature religions or even the sophisticated philosophy of Aristotle centuries later. Aristotle's basic understanding of an eternal, infinite universe persisted in scientific circles into the latter twentieth century. Even the philosophy of science that attaches to string theory and multiverses yearns for the days of Aristotle and the rhythm of the nature religions.

Hal Poe serves as Charles Colson Professor of Faith and Culture at Union University in Jackson, TN. Poe has published over fifteen books on the intersection of the gospel and culture, including four books on science and faith co-authored with Jimmy Davis, the most recent of which is *God and the Cosmos: Divine Activity in Space, Time and History (IVP, 2012)*. He was elected to the Executive Council of the ASA in 2010.

In Genesis, creation has a necessary sequence from simplicity to complexity that we do not find in the other sacred texts of antiquity where “creation myths” involve a refashioning of what already existed from previous epochs. When he returned to God from his pagan apostasy, King Solomon described in Ecclesiastes the meaninglessness of “no new thing” before contrasting this pagan view of endless cycles with the idea of “a time for every purpose under heaven” (Ecclesiastes 1–3). In the universe in which we live, there was a time before which life did not exist, but then one day it did. The universe has a sequence of development, as does human culture.

The Challenge of Tradition

The Protestant Reformation arose in the sixteenth century with a commitment to scripture over tradition as the final authority in matters of faith. Ironically, in some cases, the Protestants who translated the Bible into English were governed by tradition rather than the actual words of the biblical text in deciding how they translated the scriptures. The cases vary in their significance.

One of the most obvious examples of the choice of tradition over text concerns how the King James Bible treats the name of God. When God revealed himself to Moses and commissioned him to lead the children of Israel out of Egypt, he told Moses that his name is *Yahweh*, and he instructed Moses to call him by name. Over the centuries, the descendants of the Hebrews grew superstitious about the covenant name of God and resolved that it was too holy to speak; therefore, when they came to the holy name in the scriptures, they said *Adonai* (Lord) instead of *Yahweh*. The translators of the King James Bible carried on this tradition of not speaking the name of God by replacing the holy name with the title LORD spelled with all capital letters whenever the name *Yahweh* occurs.

Another example concerns how the translators dealt with the Greek word *baptizo*, which means to dip or immerse. By the time of the King James Bible, the English church had not practiced the immersion of new Christians in centuries. To translate the word would have conflicted with the tradition of initiation into the church. Instead of translating the word, therefore, the translators transliterated the word as *baptize*.

The case of the seven days of creation in the first chapter of Genesis, however, has probably had the most significant impact on how modern people view the Bible and its authority. The King James Bible presents creation within the context of six consecutive days within a single week that culminate with God’s rest on the seventh day. Coming at the dawn of the scientific age in 1611, the King James Bible was the Bible used in the English-speaking world as scientific knowledge propelled Western culture dramatically beyond all other cultures of the world in terms of technological sophistication and understanding of how the physical world works. With the remarkable success of the scientific method in physics and chemistry, scientific knowledge came to be regarded as the real knowledge, and for something to be true, it should be scientific. This attitude created a crisis for faith in the nineteenth century with the development of the sciences of geology and paleontology.

As geologists discovered layers of sediment and rock and developed theories to account for interruptions of strata, a new view developed regarding the age of the earth. The geology of the earth suggested great antiquity and that the earth had undergone tremendous stress, cataclysm, and upheaval over millions of years. This view appeared to contradict the clear meaning of the biblical text with which everyone was familiar. As paleontologists discovered bones of gigantic creatures that no longer roam the earth, and as these bones appeared in layers of the earth from the distant past, another contradiction with the biblical account of creation appeared to arise.

By the mid-nineteenth century, several theories had arisen to account for the discrepancy between the clear meaning of the biblical account and what the new sciences had proposed. The Scofield Reference Bible follows the view of the Reverend William Buckland, Oxford’s first professor of geology, who believed that a great “gap” of millions of years existed between the creation in the first verse of Genesis and the first day. During this gap, all the catastrophes of the geological record occurred. Scottish geologist Robert Jameson proposed the Age-Day Theory in 1813 which argued that each day of Genesis 1 represents a vast period of time. Another approach to the contradiction comes from the Scientific Creationism movement which argues that the science is wrong and that the clear meaning of the text should be accepted. All of these views, and many other perspectives in the science and religion area, have one thing

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in common. They all agree that the Bible appears to teach that creation occurred in six consecutive days within a single week. In translating the first chapter of Genesis, however, the King James translators followed the tradition rather than the text.

The Text as Written

In the Hebrew text of Genesis, the days of creation occur sequentially, but not necessarily as consecutive days. January 1 and February 1 come sequentially, but not consecutively because other days intervene between the two days. It is even possible that the fourth day is intentionally placed out of order chronologically.¹ Instead of describing the first act of creation as happening on “the first day,” Genesis states that it happened “one day.”² The action does not occur on the first day. It happens one day. A cardinal rather than an ordinal numeral is used. Instead of the second act of creation happening on “the second day,” the original text of Genesis actually states that it happened on “a second day.” On and on the description of creation goes in the original Hebrew text with “a third day,” “a fourth day,” and “a fifth day.” Finally, the pattern changes at the end of the sequence when the Hebrew text explains that humans were made on “the sixth day” and that God rested on “the seventh day” (emphasis added):

- 1:5 **דְּחַא מוּי** (adjective numeral masculine singular)
one day
- 1:8 **יְנִשׁ מוּי** (adjective masculine numeral ordinal)
a second day
- 1:13 **יְשִׁלֶּשׁ מוּי** (adjective masculine numeral ordinal)
a third day
- 1:19 **יְעִיבֵר מוּי** (adjective masculine numeral ordinal)
a fourth day
- 1:23 **יְשִׁמָּח מוּי** (adjective masculine numeral ordinal)
a fifth day
- 1:31 **יְשֶׁשׂה מוּי** (definite article—adjective masculine
singular numeral ordinal)
the sixth day
- 2:2 **יְעִיבֶשֶׂה מוּיב** (definite article—adjective
masculine singular numeral ordinal)
the seventh day

The days do not necessarily come one after another without intervening time. Instead of the next day, the events unfold on some other day.

The grammar of the Hebrew language and the way words are formed in Hebrew based on the verb makes Hebrew one of the most regular languages on Earth. It follows strict patterns. Even its irregular verbs follow regular patterns. Students of Hebrew learn the language by learning the patterns. An interruption in the normal pattern comes as a striking emphasis. As in English and many European languages, Hebrew has a definite article that is normally used when referring to one of the seven consecutive days within a week, namely, the second day, the third day, the fourth day, and so forth. This pattern continues for the first ten consecutive days within a month. This pattern may be seen clearly in the first books of the Bible:

Genesis 22:4; 31:22; 34:25; 40:20; 42:18

Exodus 2:13; 12:3, 16, 18; 13:6; 16:5, 22, 26, 27, 29, 30; 19:11, 15, 16; 20:10, 11; 22:29; 23:12; 24:16; 31:17; 34:21; 35:2; 40:2

Leviticus 7:17, 18; 9:1; 12:3; 13:5, 6, 27, 32, 34, 51; 14:9, 10, 23, 39; 15:14, 29

Numbers 7:12, 18, 24, 30, 36, 42, 48, 54, 60, 66; 29:17, 20, 23, 26, 29, 32, 35.

Deuteronomy 1:3; 5:14; 16:4, 8

Genesis forms the introductory section of a group of books known as the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Bible also known as the Books of Moses and as the Torah). In every example of the enumeration of a full sequence of consecutive days within a week or a month in the Pentateuch, the pattern of using the definite article with the ordinal numeral is always followed. Beyond the tenth day, however, the Hebrew text never uses the definite article, probably because numbers above ten are formed by the combination of more than one word instead of by a single word.³ In Exodus 19:16, the frightening presence of God happened on “the third day.” In Exodus 16:5, the Israelites are instructed to gather twice as much manna on “the sixth day.” In Genesis 22:4, Abraham arrived at the place of sacrifice on “the third day” after setting out. At the battle of Jericho, God gives instruction about what the people are to do on consecutive days until “the seventh day” when they were to take the city (Joshua 6:3–4, 12–15). These well-known examples illustrate the normal Hebrew pattern of using the definite article to indicate consecutive days within a week. The seven days of creation in Genesis 1 do not follow this pattern. The text

says something quite different, which means something quite different.⁴

The definite article is frequently omitted in Hebrew poetry, especially in the oldest poetry such as the psalms.⁵ While the first chapter of Genesis has a liturgical quality to it, that quality does not make it poetry. One might argue that the passage is highly poetic. On the other hand, all of Hebrew prose is highly poetic. One would expect to find the definite article in a discussion of successive days in a single week. The definite article is normally found in other Hebrew narratives in which events take place within the time frame of a week, but it does not occur here. Its absence is conspicuous and significant for what its absence conveys.

The presence or absence of the definite article with the ordinal numeral and the noun "day" makes an enormous difference in meaning. If I relate my life and how I came to Union University, I might say,

One day I was born.

A second day I started preaching.

A third day I started being married to Mary Anne Whitten.

A fourth day I started being a father to Rebecca and then to Mary Ellen.

A fifth day I started living in Minnesota.

The sixth day I started working at Union.

The seventh day I die.

This narrative is true, and it captures the significant moments that began on particular days. The activity or state that begins on a particular day had not occurred previously, and it continues on into the future. So why does this narrative of my life use a definite article for day six? The sixth day is the focus of activity in which I am now engaged. We may also speculate on why day six of creation has a definite article. It appears that the rest of the Bible focuses its attention on God's creation of people and his ongoing relationship with them. We could speculate further that we still live in the age inaugurated by the sixth day. We have not yet entered into the Sabbath rest of God (Heb. 4:1-10). This brief speculation demonstrates the difference between revelation and theology. The text is revelation from God. Theology is speculation about the text.

A more controversial issue that affects the interpretation of the text relates to the verb forms in Genesis 1.

The verbs that describe the creative acts of God on the days of creation are all imperfect verbs. Ancient Hebrew had no past, present, or future tense verbs as English does. Its verbs focus on the quality of action. The perfect verb indicates completed action, whether the action is completed in the past, the present, or the future. The imperfect verb indicates incomplete action, whether the action was begun in the past, the present, or the future. On the surface, this concept of verbs may sound strange to us today with our worldview, but we have a way of thinking that corresponds to this approach which we use every day. We call it the historical present, and even seasoned writers are known to lapse into it. Consider this example:

Charles Dickens tells us of the contradictory nature of French society in the opening of *A Tale of Two Cities*. He writes about the contrast between English and French approaches to the challenges of the eighteenth century, and he says that love is more powerful than a revolution.

Though the verbs are all in the present tense, we know that the paragraph refers to the writing of Charles Dickens one hundred and fifty years ago. It is not necessary to have a past tense verb in order to understand that events have taken place in the past.

The imperfect verb indicates incomplete or continuing action. The activity of God during the seven days of creation employs the imperfect verb, indicating continuing action or action which has begun but which does not stop. By contrast, the first sentence of the Bible uses the perfect tense of the verb "create" to indicate that God has completed the creation of the heavens and the earth. The perfect verb form of create is rendered as a past tense verb in English (created), for to say that God completes something is to give it a quality of certainty as though it has already happened, but the text then goes on to describe the continuing creation by God.⁶

In contrast to the completed action of the perfect tense, the imperfect tense indicates that action has begun, but that it continues. The action unfolds sequentially, with each new act of creation introduced by the construction known as the *waw* consecutive (the *waw* conjunction plus an imperfect verb), so named because the simple Hebrew letter *waw* serves as the conjunction. A literal translation of Genesis 1:3 might be, "And then God begins to say, let there begin to be and continue to keep on

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being light. And then there begins to be and continues to keep on being light." The activity that begins "one day" continues beyond the day on which it begins. The light continues to be called forth on the day when the firmament begins to be established, along with the dry land and the oceans. The first day comes to an end, but the activity of the first day does not. The light, the firmament, the dry land, and the oceans continue to be called forth and shaped even on the day when God begins to call the earth to begin to put forth plant life. This Hebrew thought pattern of continuing action is reflected in Peter's discussion of the last judgment when he observes,

First of all, you must understand that in the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and following their own evil desires. They will say, "Where is this 'coming' he promised? Ever since our fathers died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation." (2 Pet. 3:3-4)

Notice the Hebrew pattern of thought that piles up the continuing action. Notice the emphasis on the "beginning of creation." It is not a modern Western worldview that nurtured Peter, but the ancient Hebrew thought pattern of his culture.

Thus, the calling forth of light was not an activity of God on one particular day only, but an activity of God, once begun, that continues on. This idea of the continuing activity of God over his creation is reflected in the words of Jesus: "He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and unrighteous" (Matt. 5:45). We might make the theological judgment that God is still calling forth the light. The modern translations make no attempt to capture the force of the Hebrew as they attempt to place the verbs into English tenses, but we see a reflection of this idea of the continuing calling forth by God in Hebrews 1:3: "upholding all things by the word of his power." As a result of neglecting the force of the verbs, however, the possible interpretation of the Bible has been skewed.⁷

On a fourth day of creation (which was not, grammatically speaking, *the* fourth day of the universe), something intriguing happens. Up until this point, the action happens sequentially, as indicated by the *waw* consecutive construction, normally translated "and then." With the creation of the sun and the moon we have one of the great problems in science and religion. Some will ask how plants can exist before the sun. The timing for the creation of the sun

and moon falls out of sequence for a modern understanding of the solar system.⁸ While the sentence about the creation of the sun and moon comes after the sentences about the creation of plants, the grammar allows the possibility for their creation at the same time or prior to the preceding action. Instead of relying on the *waw* consecutive conjunction ("and then") with a piling up of imperfect verbs to relate the narrative, the text introduces the perfect of relation construction (the *waw* conjunction with the perfect verb) in Genesis 1:14-15 which can thrust the action backward.⁹ The grammatical point is that the verbs suggest that what happened on "a fourth day" could have taken place at an earlier time.¹⁰ The change in verbs on this day is the more striking because of the regular pattern of using the imperfect verb throughout the rest of the creation narrative. Patterns are important in the Hebrew language and the interruption of the pattern at the one point in which it would make a difference to the modern world is noteworthy. It is possible that the text makes a change at this point with no other purpose than to offer variety, but the coincidence is remarkable if that is the case.

This placing of the activity of point number four at an earlier period is reflected in the Hebrew thought pattern of Jesus. In describing the end times, he spoke of wars, revolutions, earthquakes, famines, and pestilence. Then he said, "But before all this, they will lay hands on you and persecute you" (Luke 21:12). Then he goes back to a chronological sequence of events leading up to the coming of the Son of Man in glory. Though the creation of sun and moon fall fourth in the list of aspects of creation, the construction of the *waw* conjunction with a perfect verb suggests that it may have occurred earlier.

The Translation Tradition

Several hundred years before the birth of Christ, the Hellenistic Jewish community in Alexandria translated the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek. This translation, known as the Septuagint and signified by the Roman numerals LXX, became the standard biblical text of the Jews in the time of Christ throughout the Roman Empire. Hebrew had ceased to be a spoken language, so much so that when Jesus quoted Psalm 22 in Hebrew from the cross, the Jerusalem mob did not know what he was saying (Matt. 27:46-47; Mark 15:34-35). The Koine Greek of

the New Testament does not have the same regularity as Hebrew, for as the commercial language of the Roman Empire, it resembles modern pigeon English compared with Classical Greek. The Greek of the Septuagint Pentateuch (ca. 250 BC) represents an early form of the transition from Classical Greek to Koine Greek and probably falls only a few generations after Alexander the Great.

In the Septuagint, the rabbis followed the Hebrew text and did not use the definite article with the ordinal numerals and days of creation. The omission of the definite article in a Greek text would not be absolutely determinative in itself, but as the rabbinic understanding of the original Hebrew text in ancient times, it serves to explain why the ancient rabbis understood the days of creation to represent a vast period of time.¹¹ As in the Hebrew text, the Septuagint adds the definite article when it comes to the sixth and seventh days:

- 1:5 ἡμέρα μία (noun, feminine nominative singular adjective)
day one
- 1:8 ἡμέρα δευτέρα (noun, feminine nominative singular adjective)
day second
- 1:13 ἡμέρα τρίτη (noun, feminine nominative singular adjective)
day third
- 1:19 ἡμέρα τετάρτη (noun, feminine nominative singular adjective)
day fourth
- 1:23 ἡμέρα πέμπτη (noun, feminine nominative singular adjective)
day fifth
- 1:31 ἡμέρα ἕκτη (noun, feminine nominative singular adjective)
day sixth
- 2:2 τῇ ἡμέρᾳ τῇ ἕκτῃ (definite article, noun, definite article, feminine dative singular adjective)
the day the sixth
- 2:2 τῇ ἡμέρᾳ τῇ ἑβδόμῃ (definite article, noun, definite article, feminine dative singular adjective)
the day the seventh

With the Septuagint, however, the rabbis do make an intriguing alteration or interpretation of the activity of God at the end of creation. At the end of verse 31, the Septuagint does not follow the

Hebrew text. Instead, it continues the earlier pattern and describes the making of people as occurring on “a sixth day” instead of “the sixth day.” What the Hebrew text places in verse 31, the Septuagint then moves to chapter two, verse two. The Septuagint begins Genesis 2:2 by adding that God finished his work “on the sixth day” before stating that God rested “on the seventh day.”

In the last days of the Western Roman Empire, about a decade before Alaric sacked Rome in 410, Jerome translated the Bible into Latin. His translation, known as the Vulgate, was the text of the Bible used by the Roman Catholic Church until the 1960s. Latin, like modern Russian, has no definite article. It has no way to say “the book.” It can only say “book.” As a result, the Vulgate does not carry forward the same emphasis as the Hebrew text of the Bible.

- 1:5 *dies unus* (noun, adjective nominative masculine singular cardinal)
day one
- 1:8 *dies secundus* (noun, adjective nominative masculine singular ordinal)
day second
- 1:13 *dies tertius* (noun, adjective nominative masculine singular ordinal)
day third
- 1:19 *dies quartus* (noun, adjective nominative masculine singular ordinal)
day fourth
- 1:23 *dies quintus* (noun, adjective nominative masculine singular ordinal)
day fifth
- 1:31 *dies sextus* (noun, adjective nominative masculine singular ordinal)
day sixth
- 2:2 *die septimo* (noun, adjective dative masculine singular ordinal)
day seventh

Whereas the Hebrew and Septuagint scriptures indicate indefinite days of creation in terms of their relationship to each other in time, the Vulgate has no necessary meaning one way or the other. Augustine, a contemporary of Jerome who knew neither Greek nor Hebrew, assumed that the days of creation involved vast periods of time. Moreover, he believed that the days of Genesis 1 refer to the creation of the angels and their light, rather than to solar days.¹²

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A New Tradition Begins

For a thousand years, the Vulgate was the Bible of the West. Then, in England during the late 1300s, John Wycliffe initiated a translation of the Bible into English. Known as “The Morningstar of the Reformation,” Wycliffe argued that the Bible, as God’s law, represented the highest authority on Earth. During the crisis of authority at the end of the medieval period when schism in the Roman Catholic Church had resulted in multiple popes and when tradition had so overshadowed the faith that corruption crept in at every side, Wycliffe argued for reform of the practices, government, and theology of the church along biblical lines.

Ironically, it was the Wycliffe Bible translation of Genesis, which sought to combat human tradition, that first introduced the definite article into the text. The effect of this introduction changes the meaning of the text from seven sequential days of creation that are not immediately consecutive, to a single week of seven successive, consecutive days:

- 1:5 o daie
- 1:8 the seconde dai
- 1:13 the thridde dai
- 1:19 the fourthe dai
- 1:23 the fyueeth dai
- 1:31 the sixte day
- 2:2 the seuenthe dai

Wycliffe was in the vanguard of the new thinking that ushered in not only the Reformation, but also the scientific revolution, for both were the products of the same reforming intellectual spirit within the Roman Catholic Church. Though Wycliffe led in the translation of the Wycliffe Bible, it was not completed until ten years after his 1384 death. Wycliffe appears not to have done the translation work of the Old Testament himself, but to have left it to Nicholas Hereford and John Purvey who translated from the Latin Vulgate rather than from the original Hebrew text. This article will not attempt to explain what influences in the late medieval period might have led to this new tradition. This article merely indicates that a new tradition developed concerning the creation account, just as the doctrines of transubstantiation, papal infallibility, purgatory, and many more arose during this period.

All of the English language Bibles of the English Reformation period followed the tradition established by the Wycliffe Bible of treating the days of creation as consecutive days within a single week, including Tyndale, Coverdale, the Geneva Bible, and the Bishops’ Bible. By the time the translators began their work on the King James Bible, the mindset within the culture of conceiving of creation as having taken place within the framework of a single week of seven consecutive days formed part of the cultural worldview of the translators. Tradition overruled text. This tradition continued into the late twentieth century when a flurry of activity produced an avalanche of new translations. The notable exceptions to this tradition are the American Standard Version (1901) and its revision, the New American Standard Version (1971), and the Jewish Publication Society’s Tanakh (1917 and 1985), which relied upon the American Standard Version. These translations follow the Hebrew text in not including the definite article.

The tradition has become so entrenched that even Hebrew scholars in the English Bible tradition fail to explore the significance of the glaring absence of a definite article with the days of creation. It is not a theological issue, because conservative and liberal scholars alike simply overlook the matter until it is called to their attention. Commentators as diverse as Gerhard von Rad, Ralph Elliott, E. A. Speiser, Walter Brueggemann, James Montgomery Boice, and John Skinner make no mention of the absence of the definite article in their commentaries.¹³

On the other hand, Kenneth Mathews notes the absence of the definite article but does not discuss its implications.¹⁴ G. Henton Davies, Gordon J. Wenham, and Victor P. Hamilton give literal translations of the Hebrew as “one day,” “a second day,” and so forth, yet in their commentaries on the text, they fail to explain why they gave this translation and what difference it makes.¹⁵ Bruce Waltke notes that the absence of “the definite article on each of the first five days suggests they may be dis-chronologized,” but he does not expound on what the suggestion means.¹⁶ C. F. Keil and Franz Delitzsch took note of the problem of the absence of the article with “day one” and proposed a theory to account for the absence of the article: “Like the numbers of the days which follow, it is without the article, to show that the different days arose from the constant recurrence

of evening and morning.”¹⁷ Claus Westermann took note of the use of “one day” and suggested that it should be understood as an ordinal number, but he took no notice of the absence of the article with the other days.¹⁸ Thus, the power of tradition veils what would otherwise be obvious.

Conclusion

The perceived conflict between science and religion in the West occurs in large part because of a perceived contradiction between the biblical account of creation and the scientific account of cosmogony. Time is the issue. The science and religion debate has tended to be the arena of philosophers of religion rather than of theologians, and certainly not of biblical scholars. The neglect of such an important topic by merely acquiescing to a tradition, whose origin is vague at best, represents a strange abdication of responsibility. The King James Bible firmly entrenched a view of creation as having taken place within the span of seven chronologically successive, consecutive days within a calendar week. The text cannot sustain this understanding, but with people, tradition too often trumps text.

From this brief survey of a rather esoteric discussion of Hebrew grammar, we may draw several conclusions that range in degree of certainty. The grammar of one situation may dictate the meaning, while the grammar in another situation may only allow for a range of understandings. Of the issues raised in this discussion, the following conclusions may be drawn.

The absence of the definite article with the days of creation almost certainly means that the days are intended to be understood as not occurring in immediate succession to one another without any intervening time. The absence of the definite article precludes the option that the days compose what a modern person regards as a single week of seven days, each day comprising twenty-four hours. What does this mean for the other passages in the Bible that refer to creation as having occurred within a week? There are no such places. Instead, we find several references to God creating the world in six days (Exod. 20:11; 31:17). Whether the six days of creation occur in immediate sequence or with time intervals between, the idea of six days in which God commences new facets of creation is maintained.

Of less certainty from the grammatical constructions, but still of high probability, is the idea that God has continued to be active in creation since he began creating. The deist position would be that God executed an act of creation at the beginning, but that God has been removed from creation since the initial decree. The force of the piling up of imperfect verbs would argue that God begins a good work and continues until he brings it to completion on the last day, an idea reflected in Philippians 1:6. Note that the last day of creation, the seventh day, does not have evening and morning. We might speculate that the seventh day, the last day, is the Day of the LORD.

From high probability, we move to mere possibility that the making of the sun and the moon in day four precedes the previous action. Grammarians continue to argue the point of whether the verb form of the perfect is changed by the *waw* conjunction into an imperfect. If so, then the creation of the sun and moon are intended by the text to have occurred after the previous action. If not, and the force of the perfect verb continues as a perfect verb, then John Joseph Owens’s understanding of the perfect of relation would suggest that the creation of sun and moon occurred at the same time or previous to the preceding action in the narrative.

Neither of the extreme positions on the meaning of Genesis 1 seems tenable. One position argues for a literal understanding of creation as occurring within a week of seven solar days. For the reasons mentioned in this article, it seems highly improbable that the text will allow that understanding. Tradition insists upon such an understanding, but the text does not. The other extreme position argues that the first chapter of Genesis should be understood simply as a poetic affirmation of faith in a creator God. This view regards Genesis as a record of the beliefs of people of faith from an ancient culture. The issue with this view is that it ignores the anthropological problem, that the people of the ancient world had no experiential reason rooted in the world in which they lived that would have given them a reason to believe in a single God, who created the world in a sequential pattern, beginning with the creation of the basic elements and proceeding toward the complexity of life. All the great cultures of the world that had made significant advances in astronomical observation had concluded that the world continues in an endless stream of cycles. The most primitive cultures found

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this same cyclical understanding in the perpetual cycles of the seasons. It remains for some theory to propose an alternative understanding of how the Hebrews would have conceived such a linear understanding of the world apart from revelation.¹⁹

This article has proposed that both extreme positions are mistaken because of the assumptions they have accepted from the English Bible tradition of translating Genesis. This article did not explore the powerful force of popular religion in creating religious traditions that may be contrary to the teaching of the Bible, but popular religion has always played an important role in shaping theology that eventually becomes dogma. The sequential account of creation written in antiquity presents a powerful argument for the Genesis creation account as more than a mere cultural artifact of an ancient people. The linear understanding of cosmology that matches the modern scientific breakthroughs of the twentieth century provides evidence of revelation. On the other hand, a literal reading of the text allows for creation that took place over a vast period of time with new things occurring in chronological sequence throughout that vast period. The text is silent about the length of time over which the six days of creation began, except that they did not take place within an Earth reckoning of a solar week. ~

Notes

¹For a technical discussion of the chronological ordering of the days in Genesis 1, see David A. Sterchi, "Does Genesis 1 Provide a Chronological Sequence?," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 39, no. 4 (1966): 529–36. See also M. Throntveit, "Are the Events in the Genesis Account Set Forth in Chronological Order? No," in *The Genesis Debate*, ed. R. F. Youngblood (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1986), 53.

²I began dealing with this issue in print several years ago when I began to realize that few seminary-trained theologians grasped the significance of the grammar of the Hebrew text, while at the same time lacking even a rudimentary understanding of modern science since Einstein, Bohr, and Lemaître. See Harry L. Poe and Jimmy H. Davis, *Science and Faith: An Evangelical Dialogue* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2000), 79–81, 125–33; Harry Lee Poe and J. Stanley Mattson, *What God Knows: Time and the Question of Divine Knowledge* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2005), 5–25.

³This pattern may be seen clearly in the first books of the Bible: Genesis 8:4, 14; Exodus 12:6, 14; 16:1; Numbers 7:72, 78.

⁴C. John Collins has written an article that illustrates how Hebrew scholars can acknowledge the absence of the definite article and yet adhere to the English Bible tradition.

See C. John Collins, "The Refrain of Genesis 1: A Critical Review of Its Rendering in the English Bible," *The Bible Translator* 60, no. 3 (2009): 121–31.

⁵C. L. Seow, *A Grammar for Biblical Hebrew* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1995), 157.

⁶In ancient Hebrew narratives, the story often begins with a perfect verb followed by imperfect verbs as in Genesis 1. The normal narrative pattern involves the introduction of each new element of the story with the construction "and then" (the conjunction plus an imperfect verb). In some cases such as in the book of Jonah, the narrative actually begins with the conjunction and an imperfect verb. Gesenius reminds us, however, that

the *perfect* and *imperfect consecutive* cannot possibly be used in a way which contradicts their fundamental character as described in §§ 106 and 107. In other words, even the *perfect consecutive* originally represents a finally completed action, &c., just as the *imperfect consecutive* represents an action which is only beginning, becoming or still continuing, and hence in any case incomplete. (*Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar*, ed. and enlarged by E. Kautzsch, 2nd English ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1920), 330, n. 2)

See also Seow, *A Grammar for Biblical Hebrew*, 147, 207.

⁷This long-held understanding of Hebrew verbs has recently come into dispute in some quarters. In recent years, a fierce debate has grown among Hebrew grammarians over the possibility that the *waw* added to a perfect verb actually changes the perfect into what the English language would consider a past tense. Bruce Waltke argues for a conversion of the tense based on long and short prefix conjugations. See Bruce Waltke and M. O'Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 455–78, 543–63. In English, the addition of the suffix *-ed* changes a present tense to a past tense. An example in English of a kind of prefix added to a verb to change its force would be *shall* or *will* prior to a verb. This view that the imperfect verb plus the *waw* prefix forms a past tense has arisen through the study of the limited number of Ugaritic texts available. Among the many problems with this new view is the problem that if the *waw* is the mark of a past tense, it can no longer serve as the conjunction linking the verb to the narrative. In other words, if the *waw* is the mark of a past tense, then it cannot be a conjunction and it would be impossible to have imperfect verbs in a sequence. Even if the imperfect with a *waw* becomes a true past tense, it is still an imperfect denoting incomplete action commenced in the past.

⁸Ralph Elliott raised this question in *The Message of Genesis* (Nashville, TN: Broadman, 1961), 32. James Montgomery Boice also notes the problem in *Genesis: An Expository Commentary*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2002), 76.

⁹John Joseph Owens used the term *perfect of relation* of a "simple act completed in relation to another act," and described it as "a simple act completed at a time previous to another act or state, thus resulting in a state of completion." See Kyle M. Yates, *The Essentials of Biblical Hebrew*, rev. ed. by John Joseph Owens (New York: Harper & Row, 1954), 132–3.

¹⁰At one time, grammarians believed that the *waw* joined to a verb converted it into the same form as the verb that preceded it. Owens reminds us that "there is no particle which has the power of changing a verbal state to another state." See Yates, *The Essentials of Biblical Hebrew*,

104. See also Seow, *A Grammar for Biblical Hebrew*, 226; Page H. Kelley, *Biblical Hebrew: An Introductory Grammar* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992), 145. Some modern grammarians cling to the old idea that the *waw* conjunction converts a verb from one form to another, sometimes called a preterite. See Allen P. Ross, *Introducing Biblical Hebrew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2001), 136.

¹¹As E. C. Colwell observed of the Greek of the Septuagint that “the Semitic original was a sacred language to be changed as little as possible in translation.” See E. C. Colwell, “The Greek Language,” in *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, vol. 2 (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1962), 484.

¹²Augustine, *City of God*, 11.5–9, in which Augustine also discusses the idea of infinite time, God’s experience of time, and his idea that there is no time before the creation of the world; *On the Literal Interpretation of Genesis*, 6.27–7.28, 12.36, 13.43. These citations come from the modern translation *St. Augustine on Genesis*, trans. Roland J. Teske (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1990).

¹³Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis*, The Old Testament Library, rev. ed. (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1976), 52–67; Ralph Elliott, *The Message of Genesis* (Nashville, TN: Broadman, 1961), 34–5; E. A. Speiser, *Genesis*, The Anchor Bible, 2nd ed. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1964), 3–13; Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis. Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Theology* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox, 1982), 22–39; Boice, *Genesis: An Expository Commentary*,

vol. 1, 72–86; John Skinner, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1910), 8–10, 20–38.

¹⁴Kenneth A. Mathews, *Genesis 1–11:26*, The New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1996), 148.

¹⁵G. Henton Davies, “Genesis,” *The Broadman Bible Commentary*, vol. 1 (Nashville, TN: Broadman, 1969), 125–33; Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, TX: Word, 1987), 2–3, 19; Gordon J. Wenham, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), 118–43.

¹⁶Bruce Waltke, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 62.

¹⁷C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament*, vol. 1, trans. James Martin (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1959), 50.

¹⁸Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1–11*, trans. John J. Scullion (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1994), 115.

¹⁹For a more developed discussion of the anthropological problem of a linear universe prior to the acceptance of Big Bang cosmology in the latter part of the twentieth century, see Harry Lee Poe and Jimmy H. Davis, *God and the Cosmos: Divine Activity in Space, Time and History* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 249–83.

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