The Meaning of Yom in Genesis 1:5

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by

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The meaning of the word *day* in Genesis is a hotly debated topic in both the scientific community and the theological community. Advances in scientific research have led to questions about the likelihood of each creation day being a literal 24-hour period or if the scientific record necessitates that the days be long epochs of time. Both sides of the issue argue that theirs must be correct and they leave no room for another viewpoint. The literalist, or 24-hour day camp, believe they must interpret Scripture so that a day is the same length as days currently observed today. The scientific community, at least those that subscribe to long epochs of time, or similar views, believe that any interpretation or viewpoint must synthesize Scripture with modern scientific advances. Both sides are convinced that their view is the only correct view.

The main question that needs to be answered is whether Scripture leaves room for long epochs of time between creative days or does Scripture mandate a belief in literal 24-hour days? It is the contention of this paper that despite there being several theories that seek to synthesize Scripture with science by assuming various lengths of time to each day, the literary evidence, combined with the testimony of Scripture, only allows for the word *yom* in Genesis 1:5 to be a literal 24-hour period.

In English, there are many words that have multiple meanings depending on the context of the word’s usage. This is true of many languages including both Biblical Hebrew and Greek.\(^1\) Hugh Ross makes this point by observing that in English day can mean both long periods of time or single 24-hour days.\(^2\) However, this does not mean one can simply choose the definition that he or she would like based on their preference. That type of interpretation will often lead to an incorrect understanding of Scripture. To determine proper meaning the context of the passage must be taken into account.

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In the case of Genesis, the writer states six times in the passage the phrase “evening and morning” to designate a day. The writer leaves off the transitional phrase for day seven in Genesis 2:3. The absence of the phrase regarding the seventh day is important and will be dealt with shortly.

The plain reading of the text in the account of the first six days of creation, using “evening and morning” shows that yom should be interpreted as a literal 24-hour day. This is a simple rule of Bible interpretation that you must interpret a passage as written unless it is clearly figurative in nature. There is no immediate sign from the context of Genesis 1:5, or the other instances of yom in the first chapter, that the author intended the language to be figurative. Douglas Judisch explains that, “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.”

However, there are some that contend that the text is not so straight-forward and that there is room for figurative language as the mode of interpretation for the passage. But Judisch notes that few Old Testament scholars actually hold to the theories that would put the language in a figurative state creating age long periods of time.

Another important factor in proper Biblical interpretation is to examine how the Bible itself interprets any given passage. In the case of Genesis’ first chapter, Moses directly interprets the meaning of yom in his second book, Exodus. Moses, who is believed to be the author of Genesis, explains his writing in Genesis in his second book explaining that the creation week is

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3 Gen. 1:5, 8, 13, 19, 23, 31 (English Standard Version)
6 Ibid.
7 Ibid., 265.
to be understood as a regular work week. The fact that Moses wrote a commentary on his first book in Exodus allows the interpreter to achieve clarity in the author’s original intent of the passage in Genesis. If Moses said that he meant a literal work week, comprised of seven 24-hour days, then the interpreter has no valid reason to question that interpretation.

Despite the literary evidence that suggests the word *yom* in Genesis 1:5 necessitates a 24-hour day, there are several theories that try to synthesize modern scientific thinking with Scripture by changing the meaning to long epochs of time. Because of this, proper handling of the subject would not be complete without examining these theories to see if there is anything missed by the plain literary interpretation.

The first of several views is the day-age theory. This is likely the most well-known of the non-literal views. The basic building block of this viewpoint is each day was actually a long epoch of time.

A starting point for this theory is Psalm 90:4 and 2 Peter 3:8, both of which compare a day to 1,000 years. On the surface this seems support the idea of ages of time for each day of creation. However, neither of these texts are referring to creation in their context. Psalm 90 is magnifying the greatness of God and his everlasting majesty. It proclaims that time is nothing to him. This has no bearing on the precise language of Genesis 1. Likewise, 2 Peter 3:8 also gives illustration of a day to God being as a thousand years. However, this is discussing the day of the Lord’s return. Neither of these passages are describing an event in time with definite periods as in Genesis chapters one and two. To use these passages in defense of a day-age theory is to misuse the passages in their proper context.

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8 Exod. 20:11
9 Ham et al., 91.
10 Booth, 107.
Other supporters of the day-age theory focus on the seventh day as was alluded to earlier. The main argument is that because the pattern of “evening and morning” is not listed for day seven, that must mean that day seven has not ended. Harry Poe argues that Hebrews 4 shows that the sabbath has not yet ended for the Lord because we have not yet entered into it and therefore day seven continues. Ross also argues the point and takes it one step further to say that because the seventh day continues even now, each day in creation must at minimum be several thousand years. James Skillen argues, “The ultimate goal of human life from the beginning, the author of Hebrews implies, is to enter God’s rest and thereby to celebrate the seventh-day culmination of creation.”

A key problem is present with the view that day seven continues for the Lord. The argument that the seventh day continues is based solely on the fact that we are able to enter into God’s sabbath rest. However, the text does not say that the sabbath rest is the same event as the seventh day in the Genesis account. There is also no evidence from Genesis that day seven is different from the other days. As Booth explains, day seven does not have “evening and morning” because the transitional statement is not necessary. He continues, “If God concluded His work of creating the cosmos with the creative work of Gen 1, as 2:1 possibly indicates, His “rest” from creative work would continue, regardless of whether or not the days of Gen 1 were literal days.” Kenneth Matthews actually combines this theory with the fact that days 1-3 have no sun and moon and therefore cannot have a literal day.

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12 Ross, 49.
14 Ibid., 112-13.
15 Booth, 110.
16 Ibid.
To use Hebrews 4 to extend day seven is the same mistake as using Psalm 90 and 2 Peter 3 to grant thousands of years to each day. The passage is taken in isolation of the whole causing a misinterpretation of the text. When proper exegesis is applied to Hebrews 4, it is clear that it has no direct relation to the creation account in Genesis 1.

Similar to the day-age theory, the revelatory theory tries to synthesize Scripture with modern science by symbolizing the days in Genesis 1. The premise of the theory is that God’s creative work was revealed in six days, not created in six days.\(^{18}\) Not only does the theory have no literary basis in Scripture, it has no real backing from the theological community.

The major theories that do not take a literal approach to Genesis seek to synthesize the creation account with advances in modern science. While it is not within the scope of this paper to explore in-depth the science of the today, it is necessary to mention certain aspects of modern science and how they fit in with a literal approach to Genesis. There are two reasons for this exploration. The first is to show that there are logical explanations to seeming contradictions between Scripture and modern science. The second is to show that science should never be the starting point to interpretation of Scripture.

Scientists have been able to measure the speed of light and, as a result, can estimate the origins of stars and their length of life. Young Earth Creationists, those who hold to a literal 24-hour day and therefore a young universe, often will argue that everything was created with appearance of age. Ross, and others, combat this by stating this would make God a deceiver.\(^{19}\) However, Ross specifically will concede that Adam and Eve must have been created with age as they could not have survived as babies.\(^{20}\) If they are willing to concede that Adam and Eve

\(^{19}\) Ross, 97.
\(^{20}\) Ibid., 54.
were created with age without God deceiving us, why would it be any different for the rest of his creation work?

But should science ever be the barometer by which we measure Scripture or should Scripture help us to interpret science? In the situation surrounding the word *yom* science holds no factor in whether or not the passage means a literal 24-hour period or something else. Science does not see the past. This is an argument that the non-literalist camp will try to use. The problem is that it is not known whether or not the past worked the same as it does today. In at least one part of creation, rainfall, it is certain that creation is different today than in the beginning.21

The idea of science conflicting with the Genesis account if one holds to a literal viewpoint is misleading. Since science can only make observations and theories about the past, it cannot be said that science strikes down the literal viewpoint. True science, that which can be observed and repeated, does not and cannot strike down the literal viewpoint. Creation cannot be repeated. It is a historical event, not a scientific experiment.

The fact that the universe has not always functioned as it does today leaves open the possibility that things were created with the appearance of age. Science cannot account for this. Science can only make observations and theorize what may have happened. It is not concrete. Therefore, science cannot be the barometer that guides Scriptural interpretation. However, non-literalists and secular scientists often seek after science rather than God and Scripture for understanding of Scripture.22

The evidence is clear that creation took place in six days according to Scripture. That was never the debate. But a clear examination of the literary evidence, Scriptural evidence, and yes,

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21 Gen. 6
22 Ham et al., 80.
even scientific evidence, has shown clearly that creation, according to Scripture, was completed in six literal days.

The word yom, while having a range of meaning, clearly means a 24-hour day in the context of the creation account in Genesis. The age theories are not compatible with the literary context of Genesis 1 and 2. Science does seem to conflict, as discussed earlier, but there is ample room within Scripture as well as true science to allow for things being created with age. This means that not only is Scripture to be interpreted as a literal 24 hour day for each day of creation but also does not conflict with true science while holding to that view.
Bibliography


