

June 20, 2021
Adams Center Baptist Church
Interpreting Genesis 1-2

Last time we were together we began looking at some interpretive principles that would be important for interpreting Genesis chapter 1. Today, we want to take those three principles: genre, author's intent, and letting Scripture interpret Scripture to take a look at the most straightforward interpretation of Genesis 1 – what we could call the literal interpretation (sometimes called the 24-hour day interpretation). Why are we doing this? Well, first, because we believe in the Bible as God's Word, and we should study it. Second, we're trying to answer objections that people have to Christianity, and sometimes our inadequate interpretations of Scripture get us into trouble with people unnecessarily. Third, as we've been answering the objection "Has Science Disproved Christianity?" I think we've created a false choice for future generations, the young people that attend our churches. The testimony of many students who are raised in conservative churches, but who surrender their faith in college is because it seems they have to choose between science and Scripture. Maybe, that isn't really the choice at all. Maybe, the choice is between science and a misinterpretation of Scripture, or between Scripture and false science.

If we can get a better understanding of Moses' meaning in Genesis 1, maybe we can point people toward, instead of away from, genuine Biblical faith.

That's why we're looking at some of the interpretations of Genesis 1. I realize that I'm doing more teaching here than really preaching, but right now in this season of our church, we don't have an opportunity for a regular mid-week service or a Sunday school class. Some day, Lord willing, we'll be able to do that. What I'm trying to do is equip you, the saints, to do the work of the ministry. That's what Ephesians 4 says I should be doing. I want you to be able to give an answer to every person who comes your way asking you for the reason for the hope that is in you, with gentleness and respect.

That being said, I don't want to bore you to death, and I'm not expecting all of you to be seminary students. I'm going to try and break this down in the simplest way possible. We're going to look at what people call the literal or 24-hour day interpretation of Genesis 1, and I need you to sit up on the edge of your seat. I'm asking you to tap into the love you have for your family and your friends that don't know Jesus, and give me 30 minutes, so you can walk out of here today, more equipped to reach them with the Good News about our Savior. Amen?

Last week, we read through all of chapter 1, and the beginning of chapter 2. I don't want to take the time to do that again, but I want you to open your Bibles or your Bible apps to Genesis 1, so you can be looking at this as we go through it. If you have questions about what I'm saying, send me a message and I'll get back to you.

Those that hold to the literal or 24-hour day interpretation of Genesis 1 are also what we would call young earth creationists. I once was a young earth creationist. I remember as a college

student handing out pamphlets from the Institute of Creation Research on Earth Day in the campus union. Young earth creationists take the aim of Genesis chapter 1 to be to communicate scientific information about the origin of the world and humanity.

God created the world in six consecutive 24-hour days about ten to twenty thousand years ago. This interpretation takes the text at face value; it takes the text literally to say what it says.

Genre. Jonathan Sarfati, a young earth creationist, in his commentary on Genesis 1 to 11 identifies the genre of this passage as history. If the genre is history, it's the reporting of what happened as it happened. Now we're getting somewhere. You remember last week we talked about genre as an important part of understanding a portion of Scripture. So, let's talk about genre. Chapter 2 of Sarfati's commentary is entitled "Genesis is History, Not Poetry or Allegory." Immediately, you should note that there are other options that Sarfati completely ignores. He sets up a really narrow set of choices. Is Genesis History or is it Poetry or Allegory? But, there are more options to consider. When we look at some of the other interpretations of Genesis, we'll talk about those other options.

Genesis 1 to 11 may in fact not be poetry nor allegory. These chapters are written in a narrative form. But that doesn't necessarily mean that they belong to the genre of history. Sarfati and young earth creationists in general tend to combine narrative form with history, and that isn't necessarily the case. For example, Sarfati and other young earth creations make the observation that the early chapters of Genesis frequently use a grammatical construction in Hebrew called the "waw-consecutive." Waw is the Hebrew word for "and." Applying this to Genesis 1, the first verb in Genesis 1 is bara – create. In the beginning God created. That first verb uses a certain tense and all the verbs that come after uses another tense, and this is exactly what you would expect, Sarfati says, from a historical narrative.

But here's the thing; it's also what you would expect from a non-historical narrative. Myths are narratives as are folk tales and legends. They relate a story involving a sequence of events, but they're not historical narratives. From its being narrative, it doesn't follow that Genesis 1-11 is history; only that it's not a poem. It is narrative prose, but it doesn't follow that it's history.

Sarfati goes on to ask: if Genesis were history, how would you expect it to look? He says we can answer that from the style of the undisputed historical books in the Old Testament like Exodus, Joshua, Judges, and Genesis chapters 12 to 50. This argument, however, backfires, for that comparison is precisely what leads scholars to differentiate Genesis 1 to 11 from such historical narratives. For example, the prominent evangelical Old Testament commentator, Gordon Wenham, observes that when Genesis 1 to 11 is compared with Genesis chapters 12 to 50 a striking difference emerges.

Chapters 1 to 11 are full of parallels with ancient Near Eastern traditions so that it looks as though Genesis is reflecting these Near Eastern sagas both positively and negatively. Genesis 12 to 50, by contrast, are quite different, says Wenham. The whole focus of Genesis 12-50

narrows down to Abraham and his descendants, and there is no sense that these stories are adaptations of ancient Near Eastern traditions.

Sarfati's mistake is that he restricts his analysis of literary genre to grammar and style. Those are the two elements that he considers in determining genre – grammar and style. But we have to also take a look at the function of a literary text in the culture in which it was related.

Author's Intent. The question is whether the text is of the type that intends the reader to take it literally. Remember, "author's intent" was another of the interpretive principles we said last week was really important. Clearly Genesis chapters 1 to 3 are intended to be historical on some level at least. Adam and Eve, for example, are presented in chapters 2 and 3 as the first couple of the human race.

Adam and Eve are treated as historical individuals, not just symbols of mankind but as actual people who are connected to descendants by the genealogies in Genesis 1 to 11 and finally to indisputable historical figures like Abraham. And we shouldn't overlook the central figure of Genesis 1 to 11, namely God himself. God is clearly not meant to be just a symbol or a mythological figure, but a real Person Who created the world and humanity and then goes on to call the nation of Israel to be His special people. So the central figure of the Genesis narrative is a literal personal individual who is the Creator of the world and the God of Israel.

On the other hand, the Genesis narrative is also meant to be symbolic or metaphorical in certain respects. For example, the name Adam (the name of the first man) just is the Hebrew word for man. And Eve is interpreted by the author to mean the mother of all living. So Adam and Eve are not just historical individuals, but they also represent humanity. Adam is, in a sense, every man created by God. In the creation story that we have in Genesis 2 we clearly have metaphorical or anthropomorphic descriptions of God, giving God human physical characteristics. God is described as walking in the garden and looking for Adam and Eve and saying, "Where are you?" And they're hiding from God, and God must find them. This is metaphorical language. Or, again, when God creates man, it says that he fashions him out of the dust of the earth and then breathed into his nostrils the breath of life. Clearly this is not intended to be a kind of literal CPR that God performs on Adam by blowing into his nose. So there are also literary and metaphorical devices that are being used in these chapters as well.

In fact, the whole narrative in Genesis chapter 1 is an incredibly crafted piece of Hebrew literature. It is really unique. As I already said, it is not poetry. It is not a hymn. But it's not just straightforward prose either. Someone has called it exalted prose. It is a highly stylized piece of writing with a certain parallelism that is characteristic of poetry. We'll talk more about this in the coming weeks. For example, you have repeated again and again "and God said . . . and God made . . . and it was so" on the various creative days. You have the phrase, "it was evening, it was morning." It's a carefully stylistically structured chapter that exhibits a great deal of literary polish. Even the number of the Hebrew letters in Genesis 1 is carefully chosen. So it's not just a simple police report or a scientific report of what happened. Because of this, most evangelical scholars will say that these narratives are meant to be taken in a sense that is both

historical and figurative. The underlying historical events actually happened, but the narrative is told in poetic imagery or figurative speech that shouldn't be pressed for literal precision.

So Genesis 1 seems to be a kind of historical but figurative genre of writing. It covers historical events but uses poetic or figurative language to describe them. If that's correct, then it would be making unwarranted demands on the text to interpret it literally; in particular it would be unwarranted to press the Hebrew word *yom* for day to mean that the world was created in six consecutive 24-hour days.

For example, in Genesis 2:4 we have this word *yom* used in a clearly metaphorical way. In Genesis 2:4 we read, "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." In this verse it refers to the entire creative week of Genesis 1 as a day. So in the Genesis account itself we find that it uses the word *yom* (day) in a metaphorical sense to describe the entire creation week and not just a 24-hour period of time.

Scripture interpret Scripture. Now, one of the best proof texts to which literalists can appeal for thinking that a six-day creation is literal in Genesis 1 comes from Exodus 20:9-11:

Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath of the Lord your God; in it you shall not do any work, you or your son or your daughter, your male or your female servant or your cattle or your sojourner who stays with you. For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and made it holy.

Here the passage says that God made the heavens and the Earth, the sea, and all that is in them in six days. So literal creationists will say that this shows that Genesis 1 is, in fact, intended to refer to a literal week of six consecutive 24-hour days. But I think that that may be pressing the passage too hard. What the Exodus passage is stressing is the pattern that is set down in Genesis 1 – the pattern of God's laboring on six creative days and then resting on the seventh day. That pattern is the same that Israel should observe in its literal workweek. But that isn't to say that because the pattern is the same that the periods or the durations described in Genesis are also therefore exactly the same duration as our ordinary calendar days. The pattern extends out to crop rotation — six years you plant, and the seventh year you let the ground rest. It's a pattern developed in the Year of Jubilee — the end of seven cycles of seven sabbatical years. The important thing is the pattern. Notice how this sabbath commandment is repeated in Exodus 31:12-17:

The Lord spoke to Moses, saying, "But as for you, speak to the sons of Israel, saying, 'You shall surely observe My sabbaths; for this is a sign between Me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I am the Lord who sanctifies you. Therefore you are to observe the sabbath, for it is holy to you. Everyone who profanes it shall surely be put to death; for whoever does any work on it, that person shall be cut off from among his people. For six days work may be done, but on the seventh day there is a sabbath of complete rest, holy to the Lord; whoever does any work on the sabbath day

shall surely be put to death. So the sons of Israel shall observe the sabbath, to celebrate the sabbath throughout their generations as a perpetual covenant.' It is a sign between Me and the sons of Israel forever; for in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, but on the seventh day He ceased from labor, and was refreshed."

Notice that this passage refers to the seventh day as the day of God's sabbath rest. But when you read Genesis 1, the seventh day is not a 24-hour period of time. It does not come to an end with the phrase "and there was evening and there was morning, the seventh day." Rather, God is, in a sense, still in his day of sabbath rest. This is an idea developed in the book of Hebrews. God is no longer creating. So if the seventh day, though referred to as "a day" and as the model for Israel's sabbath day, isn't to be taken literally, then why should the other days before it be taken to be literal 24-hour periods of time?

Those who hold to the literal interpretation will often say that when an ordinal number is used with the word yom (like "second day" or "third day" and so forth) that then it always refers to a 24-hour period of time. But this isn't a convincing argument at all. First of all, there's no grammatical rule in Hebrew that says when yom is used with an ordinal number it must refer to a 24-hour period of time. If no such examples are to be found in Hebrew literature that we have, that could simply be accidental. It could simply be a reflection of the fact that our stories or sources in Hebrew are relatively limited and there just isn't any occasion on which you have an expression like "second day" or "third day" being used in a metaphorical way. So it's not really a valid point grammatically speaking. It can simply be an accident of history or literature that we don't have passages where an ordinal number is used with yom to refer to something other than a 24-hour period of time.

Second, however, the claim is, in fact, just false anyway. We do have passages where yom is used with an ordinal number to refer to a non-literal day. Hosea 6:2 would be such an example. Hosea 6:2 says, "He will revive us after two days; He will raise us up on the third day, That we may live before Him." Here the days are clearly not 24-hour periods of time. Rather, the third day represents the time of God's restoration and healing of Israel after having wounded Israel through his judgment. So it's simply false that yom is never used with an ordinal number to refer to a non-literal day. Hosea 6:2 clearly does.

But third, I think that the claim here on the part of the literal interpreter is simply missing the point entirely. The point is that a 24-hour day can be used as a literary metaphor. Even if yom always refers to a 24-hour day, that doesn't even address the question of whether a 24-hour day couldn't be used metaphorically. Let me give an analogy. Take the English word "arm." Now, in English, the word "arm" has two senses. In one sense, it refers to a limb of the body attached to your shoulder with a hand on the end. This would be your arm. But in another sense, the English word "arm" can refer to a gun. For example, we might refer to the "right to bear arms," or someone who is carrying a "concealed arm" or we might talk about "an armed man." When we talk about an armed man, we don't mean a man who has limbs. We mean a man who's carrying a gun. So the word "arm" in English can have these two different meanings.

Now, very often the Scriptures will use the word “arm” in a metaphorical sense with respect to the Lord. For example, it will say something like this, The arm of the Lord was with them. When I say “the arm of the Lord,” I’m clearly using the word in the sense to mean a limb. I’m not talking about the Lord’s having a gun. I’m using the word “arm” in the ordinary sense of an appendage or a limb. But that doesn’t mean that it’s to be taken literally when you apply it to God (as the Mormons do) and think that God has some sort of a humanoid body. Rather, it’s a metaphor when it’s applied to God. When the Scriptures say that the arm of the Lord was with the people of Israel, what it means is something like that God’s power was with them or that he was strengthening them or that God’s favor was upon them with strength and might. In saying that “arm” means limb, if you could show that everywhere the word “arm” is used in Scripture it means a limb, that wouldn’t do anything to show that the word is not being used metaphorically to refer to something else.

In exactly the same way, even if yom is always used in Scripture to refer to a 24-hour day, that doesn’t even begin to address the question of whether a 24-hour day might not be used metaphorically for something else. So I don’t think that these arguments in favor of the literal interpretation are at all compelling. Next week, we’ll talk about some other interpretations of Genesis 1-11.

Let me conclude with this thought. We’re diving really deep into the text to understand best how to interpret it, but let’s step back for a minute to consider the big picture. God created the heavens and the earth and everything we see in them. God is the creator and sustainer of the entire universe. God is more powerful than whatever thing you are facing today, hardship, sickness, pain, difficulty, strife — God is more powerful, He created the heavens and the earth, and you can trust Him to get you through whatever you are facing.