

A Leading Challenge to Literal Days in the Creation Account: The Framework Interpretation

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The theme of this year's Mid-America Conference on Preaching is "Culture, Contextualization and the Church." One of the challenges to ministry in the 21st century is the ideological battle between evolutionary-driven science and the traditional, literal interpretation of Genesis 1.¹ Many leading educators in the world are "scientifically" convinced that the earth is at least 4.5 billion years old (http://www.talkorigins.org/faqs/dalrymple/scientific_age_earth.html). This is an assumed fact in most discussions about the origin of the earth. According to some, to reject this fact is either to seriously undermine our witness to the world or, according to others, to make us look like buffoons. For example, in a 2006 90-minute debate that *Time Magazine* arranged between Richard Dawkins, an atheist biologist, and Francis Collins, a Christian geneticist,² Collins, in response to a question about Young-earth Creationism (YEC), acknowledges that YEC advocates are sincere believers but their position is incompatible with science's assured knowledge of the age of the universe and how living organisms are related to each other. He further asserts that this type of position damages the credibility of our faith in the public arena. "Augustine," according to Collins, "explicitly warns against a very narrow perspective that will put our faith at risk of looking ridiculous. If you step back from that one narrow interpretation, what the Bible describes is very consistent with the Big Bang." In response to this, Dawkins disdainfully refers to those following YEC as "clowns" who should be ignored.³

What Collins and Dawkins hold in common is that both hold to some form of evolution, whether it is some form of theistic or atheistic evolution, and that, consequently, the earth is at least 4.5 billion years old. Whether one follows either Collins or Dawkins both hold to a view of cosmogony that is diametrically opposed to the historical tradition view of Protestant Christianity with the earth being a few thousand years old. If we interpret the Creation Account literally, we will lose a rational witness, according to Collins, or be clowns, as Dawkins asserts. However, this type of challenge has been prevalent for Bible-believing Christians for almost 200 years, though in the 21st century the attacks have become more intense and vitriolic. As a response to this type of challenge over the past couple of centuries, many Bible-believing Christians have jettisoned the literal position of Protestant Christianity in favor of some form of nonliteral

¹According to J. Ligon Duncan III and David W. Hall, the historic, literal day interpretation of the creation account "is rooted in a cumulative history of interpretation.... Not until certain theories in modern geology, biology, paleontology, anthropology, and physics gained wide acceptance in various Western intellectual communities in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries did debates about the Genesis days begin to roil the church" ("The 24-Hour View," in *The Genesis Debate: Three Views on the Days of Creation*, ed. David G. Hagopian [Mission Viejo, CA: Crux Press, 2001], p. 22).

²"God vs. Science," *Time Magazine* (5 November 2006).

³Ibid.

interpretation, such as the ruin-restoration or day-age hypothesis. By following one of these interpretations, evangelicals supposedly preserve the Bible's authority, while also attempting to maintain respectability from the world's perspective by accepting the reputed fact that the earth is 4.5 billion years old. Each of these views has serious exegetical and theological problems.⁴ However, over the past 30 to 40 years, a supposedly more appealing exegetical and theological alternative to either the gap or day-age hypotheses has become dominant among evangelicals. This alternative interpretation is the framework hypothesis (also known as the framework interpretation or literary framework view).⁵ In the early stages of the 21st century, the framework interpretation is the leading challenge to the traditional, literal interpretation of Genesis 1:1–2:3.⁶ The purpose of this workshop is to evaluate the framework view.

The history of the framework actually begins in the early 20th century when Professor Arie Noordzij of the University of Utrecht initially outlined the framework hypothesis in 1924. However, the current popularity of the framework view is largely a result of the work of Reformed scholar Meredith G. Kline. His initial entry was an article in 1958, "Because It Had Not Rained."⁷ Since Kline's initial article, other reputable Christian scholars have attempted to provide defenses of the framework interpretation (see Bibliography).

The framework view asserts that the creation "week" of Genesis 1:1–2:3 is a literary device intended to present God's creative activity in a topical, non-sequential manner, rather than a literal, sequential one. Kline supports the framework theory with three primary arguments. First, he contends that the figurative nature of the creation account demonstrates that it is arranged topically rather than chronologically. Second, he asserts that ordinary providence governed the creation account. Third, he maintains that the unending nature of the seventh day indicates that the six days of the creation week are not normal days. Our present task is to evaluate each of these propositions.

The Literary Nature of the Creation Account

The framework interpretation argues that God uses the imagery of an ordinary week to serve as a rhetorical structure for God's acts of creation. Using the literary metaphor of a "week," the author of Genesis uses a semi-poetic account where Days 1–3 find a parallel in Days 4–6. Both triads are subordinate to God's eternal Sabbath rest on the seventh day. Framework advocates use the following chart to reflect this scheme.

⁴For a definitive critique of the ruin-restoration hypothesis, see Weston W. Fields, *Unformed and Unfilled* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1978); and for two responses to the day-age hypothesis presented by Hugh Ross and Gleason L. Archer ("The Day-Age View," in *The Genesis Debate: Three Views on the Days of Creation*, ed. David G. Hagopian [Mission Viejo, CA: Crux Press, 2001], pp. 123–63), see J. Ligon Duncan and David W. Hall ("The 24-Hour Response," pp. 165–77) and Lee Irons with Meredith G. Kline ("The Framework Response," pp. 179–88).

⁵See Warren Harvey Johns, "Revelation and Creation in the Thought of Bernard L. Ramm and Carl F. H. Henry: The Creation 'Days' as a Case Study" (Ph.D. dissertation, Andrews University Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, 2005), pp. 320–23.

⁶See Todd S. Beall, "Christians in the Public Square: How Far Should Evangelicals Go in the Creation-Evolution Debate?" (paper presented at the 58th annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, Washington, D.C., 15 November 2006), pp. 1–10.

⁷*Westminster Theological Journal* 20 (May 1958): 145–57. See also Kline's subsequent article, "Space and Time," pp. 2–15.

Creation kingdoms		Creature kings	
Day 1	Light	Day 4	Luminaries
Day 2	Firmament: sky & seas	Day 5	Inhabitants: sea & winged creatures
Day 3	Dry land Vegetation	Day 6	Land animals Man
The Creator King			
Day 7	Sabbath		

As this chart shows, the structural arrangement of both triads indicates that the literary arrangement of the creation account reflects a topical arrangement rather than a chronological sequence and it emphasizes divine creative activities that culminate with the Creator King's Sabbath rest. Further, the luminaries of Day 4 control Day 1, the creatures of Day 5 govern Day 2, and the creatures of Day 6 have jurisdiction over Day 3.

However, there are at least two problems with interpreting the creation account as a semi-poetic account. First, while Genesis 1:1–2:3 reflects a somewhat stylistic use of Hebrew narrative because of its repeated phrases, the 55 uses of *waw* consecutive (a Hebrew verbal form that is predominantly used in Hebrew sequential narrative literature) strongly argue that the creation account is a sequential, chronological narrative and not a semi-poetic account. Second, the supposed parallels between the two triads are strained. For instance, the framework argues that the luminaries of Day 4 are an intentional replication of the light created on Day 1. However, this overlooks the important point that the luminaries of Day 4 are placed in the expanse created on Day 2. Thus, the luminaries of Day 4 presuppose the creation of the physical phenomenon of light on Day 1 and the expanse on Day 2. Consequently, there is nothing significant in Genesis 1:1–2:3 to undermine the traditional view that maintains this is a historical, sequential account affirming that God created the heavens, the earth and all things therein over the course of six literal, sequential days.

The Creation Account Controlled by Ordinary Providence

With the second major argument of the framework view, Kline presents the case that God used ordinary providence (God's non-miraculous operations in sustaining and directing all creation) to control the creation "week."⁸ This argument, according to Kline, is predicated on interpreting "because it had not rained" in Genesis 2:5 as presupposing that God would not have created plants until he first created an environment with the necessary rain to sustain the growth of those plants. Based upon this "unargued presupposition," it is inferred that God used ordinary providence to control the creation "week." In addition, if ordinary providence, as opposed to extraordinary providence (God's miraculous intervention in the created order), controls the period of creation, then Genesis 1:1–2:3 cannot be a sequential account because, for example, vegetation was created on Day 3 before the Sun was created on Day 4.

⁸In this brief overview, I use Kline's view of the framework interpretation as the basis for my critique. It should be noted, however, that not all framework advocates would use all three of the arguments that I outline in this paper. Some framework advocates use Gen 2:5 to support the creation week being controlled by ordinary providence, while others do not. The chief advocate using Gen 2:5 to support the framework has been Meredith G. Kline, "Because It Had Not Rained," pp. 145–57. A well-known evangelical scholar who does not use Gen 2:5 to support his understanding of the framework view is Bruce K. Waltke with Cathi J. Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), pp. 56–58, 73–78. For a listing of evangelical scholars following both forms of the framework, see my "Critique of the Framework Interpretation of the Creation Account (Part 2)," *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* 11 (2006): 64, n. 4.

What works against Kline's "unargued presupposition" in Genesis 2:5 is the context in which this verse is located. As commentators consistently note, v. 5 is part of a series of six nonsequential clauses in vv. 5–6 that provide circumstances associated with the primary proposition in v. 7: the formation of man ("Then the LORD God formed man of dust from the ground..."). This initial proposition of v. 7, a *waw* consecutive that initiates a narrative sequence that is advanced by a series of 21 *waw* consecutives in Genesis 2:4–25, introduces a narrative description of the state of the created order on Day 6 of the creation week when God formed his image bearers, Adam and Eve, to rule as vice-regents from the Garden prepared on the same day. Additionally, Genesis 1:1–2:3 works against Kline's interpretation because the creation account provides no evidence that God worked exclusively in this week through ordinary providence. In fact, the evidence is to the contrary. In Genesis 1:2, the Spirit's presence over the surface of the deep pictures his provisions for the creation. On Day 3 (vv. 9–13), the only works described are those of extraordinary providence. By divine fiat, the waters of the earth are gathered into one place, the dry land appears, and the earth produces full-grown plants along with its seed and fruit trees with seed in its fruit. The formation of man and woman on Day 6 (vv. 26–28) also involves God's miraculous intervention. Therefore, Genesis 2:5 does not establish a principle that God exclusively controlled the creation week by ordinary providence. A closer reading of the creation account in Genesis 1:1–2:3 reveals that it is more accurate to say that the creation week is governed by extraordinary providence while God is concomitantly establishing the conditions in the created order so that it could begin to operate according to normal providence. Therefore, rather than assuming that the "unargued presupposition" of Genesis 2:5 is that normal providence governed the creation period, the context of this verse describes the state of the created order on Day 6 of the creation week when God formed his image bearer to rule on earth as his vice-regent.

The Unending Nature of the Seventh Day

The third argument supporting the framework position is that the seventh "day" of the creation "week" is an unending period. Two items are alleged to support the unending nature of Day 7. First, while each of the six days of the creation week are concluded by the evening-morning formula, the description of Day 7 in Genesis 2:1–3 omits the evening-morning formula implying that it is an ongoing period. Second, Hebrews 4 confirms this understanding of Day 7 with the motif of an eternal Sabbath rest.

In response to this argument, it is necessary to notice how "evening" and "morning" are used in the creation account. The clauses "there was evening" and "there was morning" have a function in the creation narrative of marking a transition from one day of creation to the next. This is to say, an "evening" denotes the conclusion of a period of light when God suspends his creative activity of one day and the "morning" marks the renewal of light when God resumes his work. Just as the fiat and fulfillment expressions used on each day of creation are not needed on Day 7 because God's creative activities are finished, so there is no need to use the evening-morning conclusion because God's work of creation is concluded. Thus, the omission of the evening-morning formula on Day 7 neither proves nor implies that this day was unending. In addition, Hebrews 4 provides no substantive evidence indicating that Day 7 is an eternal day. The eternal rest presented in Hebrews 4 is based on an analogy with God's creative rest in Genesis 2:1–3. The author of Hebrews uses the Mosaic omission of the evening-morning conclusion as a type patterned after God's eternal rest. We should further note that the actual kind of rest in Genesis 2:2–3 is completely different than the rest in Hebrews 4:3–11. The rest of

Genesis 2:2–3 is a cessation from divine creative activity. Only the Creator can cease from that activity. It is absolutely impossible for the creature to experience that cessation. However, the Sabbath-rest of Hebrews 4:3–11 is a rest that the people of God actually experience. Therefore, the “rest” in both contexts cannot be identical. The framework position assumes that the “rest” of Genesis 2 is identical with Hebrews 4. However, instead of assuming that the “rest” of Genesis 2 and Hebrews 4 are identical, framework advocates need to demonstrate this identity.

Summary and Conclusions

This paper suggests that the framework view has some biblical problems. From an exegetical perspective, the use of the *waw* consecutive demonstrates that Genesis 1:1–2:3 is a genuine historical narrative, rather than a semi-poetic account. Again, the exegetical details in Genesis 2:5 to support Kline’s “unargued presupposition” that ordinary providence controlled the “creation week” are tenuous. The exegetical details of Genesis 2:5, as well as v. 6, indicate that vv. 5–6 provide circumstances related to the major proposition about the formation of man in v. 7.

From a theological angle, I have also noted that the use of Genesis 2:5 to argue against God’s use of extraordinary providence in Genesis 1:1–2:3 undermines God’s miraculous work in the first week of creation’s history. In addition, the framework’s equating the “rest” of Hebrew 4:3–11 with Genesis 2:2–3 is a theological oversimplification since only the Creator, rather than any created object, can cease, “rest,” from divine creative activity of Genesis 1:1–31. However, in Hebrews 4:3–11 believers enter into God’s Sabbath “rest.” Therefore, Genesis 2:2–3 and Hebrews 4:3–11 cannot describe the same type of rest.

From a hermeneutical viewpoint, the framework creates a problem in not knowing where to draw a line between literal and figurative interpretation. If the point of the Creation Account is to say that God created in an orderly fashion, as framework advocates argue, and the additional details are simply figures, where do we draw the line in knowing what to interpret literally and what to interpret figuratively? Is the serpent in Genesis 3 literal or figurative? Is the fall of Adam in Genesis 3 literal or figurative? What about the global flood in Noah’s day? What about Jesus’ performing miracles?⁹ What other doctrines will we need to reinterpret as figurative because science rules out the miraculous? If the foundation of our doctrinal beliefs is Scripture, we do not have the liberty to “play” with the biblical text.

In conclusion, the framework view poses more exegetical, theological and hermeneutical difficulties than it solves. Further, it does not provide any solid evidence to abandon the traditional, literal reading of Genesis 1–2 which provides the most biblically consistent interpretation of Genesis 1–2.

⁹Beall, “Christians in the Public Square,” pp. 9–10.

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