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— Editor

How Long an Evening and Morning?

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Most Christians would agree that a serious Bible student needs to consider the context of any given passage — the culture, language, and literary type, for example — to do justice to its interpretation. While some liberal scholars have tended to use this approach in ways that slight or deny the Bible's authority (often treating it as an ordinary, fallible, ahistorical document), Christians who hold the Bible in high regard must not discard appropriate hermeneutical methods just because some scholars have misapplied them.

Consider for a moment how different from ours was the culture (including worldview) of the Old Testament writers. The differences are still evident in the Middle East today. Let's focus specifically on the creation narrative. To question what 'day' means would not even occur to an ancient (or modern) Middle Easterner. The passage's poetry, spiritual meaning, and overall message would be accepted and appreciated without microscopic analysis of the words or sentence structure.

The spiritual and historical context in which God communicated the creation account also deserves greater attention than I have seen most commentators give. Recall that the Hebrews had been in Egypt for 430 years (Exodus 12:40-21), daily exposed to the Egyptians' pagan worship. We know from the Old Testament prophets about the Jews' propensity to incorporate local deities into their worship of God (*Yahweh*). They wanted to keep the 'high places' and to install Baal in the Lord's temple. This accumulation of gods was a common practice among the ancients. No

wonder God brought them out of Egypt into spiritually 'neutral' territory to set the record straight as to His identity and exclusive 'worthyship'.

To the Hebrews in the desert, God gave the reverberating creation account. It obliterates each of the Egyptian gods. Osiris did not create the heavens, God did. Ra does not rule the Sun, God does. The narrative's purpose had much less to do with **how** God created all things and much more to do with declaring **who** created all things. The picture is painted in bold, broad strokes that would be meaningful and authoritative across all boundaries of culture and time — and scientific advancement. How wonderful for us that God's painting depicts what ongoing research discloses about the origins of the universe, the world, and life!

How sad that many Christians have been taught to reject whatever light science may shed on Genesis. St Augustine warned us to

'be on guard against giving interpretations of Scripture that are farfetched or opposed to science, and so exposing the Word of God to the ridicule of unbelievers'.

In accepting science's legitimate role and the Bible's specific purpose, we are, in fact, applying rather than violating Biblical principles of interpretation. If the fossil record and countless other scientific findings tell us the Earth is old and the creation 'week' a long one, why should we insist otherwise? The creation story is not compromised by such data.

That the Hebrew word for 'day', *yôm*, can mean a period

of time other than 24 hours is abundantly evident. In Genesis 2:4 we read, 'In the day that the Lord God made the earth and the heavens . . .' (RSV). 'Day' here refers to all the creation days, whatever we believe about their length. In fact, any student of Scripture can find at least nine meanings of *yôm*. (Perhaps the easiest way is to use a computerised word search.) While it does most often refer to a 24-hour period, it is also used to mean time, today, forever, continually, an age, a lifespan, and perpetuity.

Perhaps the greatest obstacle to acceptance of the six creation days as long epochs is the 'evening and morning' refrain framing each day's creation events. In fact, I have often seen it argued in creationist literature that this expression seals the case for a 24-hour interpretation. But the argument simply does not hold, and the basis for my statement is the Bible itself, not some obscure linguistic reference.

'Evening and morning' is an idiomatic expression in Semitic languages. Like all idioms, its meaning is non-literal but clearly understood by native speakers. The phrase 'evening and morning' can, like *yôm*, denote a long and indefinite period. The Old Testament itself unambiguously uses the 'evening and morning' phrase in just such a way. In Daniel 8 we read the account of Daniel's ram and goat vision and the interpretation given by Gabriel. The vision covers many years; some commentators believe the time has not yet been completed. Daniel 8:26 says, 'The vision of the evenings and mornings that has been given you is true, but seal up the vision for it concerns the distant future' (RSV). In Hebrew manuscripts, 'the evenings and mornings', *ha 'arov wahabaqar*, is **not** in the plural but in the singular, identical to the expression we find in Genesis 1. Translated literally, the verse would read, 'And the vision of the evening and the morning that has been given you . . .' Here we have a clear indication from Scriptural usage that this phrase does not demand a 24-hour-day interpretation and can refer to an indefinite epoch.

One might raise the objection that during the many years between the writing of Genesis and the writing of Daniel,

the Hebrew usage could have changed, making the extrapolation from Daniel back to Genesis questionable. My response to such a challenge would be to underscore the stability of the ancient languages (perhaps due to the lack of general literacy and the rigorous professional training of those who served as scribes). I see no way to escape this example of flexible usage.

The method and length of time God used to create the heavens and the Earth and life cannot be stated with absolute certainty from science, but these are matters for scientific inquiry, not for dogma. If only I could remove from those Christians who struggle with it the sense of threat they feel when presented with the possibility of long days and an old Earth. I know it is linked with their supposition that to accept the fossil record and its time-scale is to concede the case for a radically materialistic worldview, that is, non-theistic evolution. But this supposition is false. In fact, if Christians would cease to attack palaeontologists and biologists (among others), the researchers themselves would be free to raise more questions about the validity of their theories rather than combining forces to fend off Christian attacks. Let's not interfere with the investigative process. We Christians have everything to gain and nothing to lose from the advance of scientific discovery. For the God who speaks to us through His works of creation is the same God who speaks to us in the words of the Bible.

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