

3. READING THE BIBLE, ESPECIALLY GENESIS

In Chapter 2, I suggested that one reason for the harmful “warfare” between science and faith was that the extremes who push us into warfare share some mistaken assumptions, including the way they read the Bible. So, in this Chapter we will talk about interpreting Genesis, focusing on Genesis 1. To prepare for that, we should discuss how we read the Bible in general.

How to Read the Bible

Reading any passage in the Bible can be viewed as a process in which two questions should be addressed:

1. *In its context, what did this passage mean to the inspired writer and the original audience?* Contextual factors include culture, history, the literary genre of the passage, and its relationship to other passages and to the overall narrative of Scripture. This part of the process can be a lot of work, and we may have to let the language scholars and historians inform our study.
2. *Once we’ve understood it in its original context, how do we apply what is being said to our life today?* This can also be a lot of work -- people write whole books on Christian ethics in attempting to answer this question.

Of course, these steps aren’t always difficult. In many cases, we can just pick up our Bibles and understand the main point. Finding the basic meaning and application of “Thou shalt not steal” does not require much interpretational effort.

However, we can’t always get away with shortcuts; missing the context can cause us to miss the point. It may just mean that we miss some of the richness of a passage. For example, in the parable of the Prodigal Son,¹ a straightforward reading will find the main point about God’s desire to recover the lost. But we can get more out of the passage if we understand the cultural context. In that culture, a dignified man would never run, yet this father is portrayed as running to meet his son, showing us that God values his lost children more than his own dignity.²

In some cases, reading out of context can seriously mislead. An example is John 13:14.³ A few groups have taken that very literally and made foot-washing a ritual, almost a sacrament. However, in the culture, foot-washing was what the servants did; it was an act of service and humility. To obey this command of Jesus does not mean washing feet (although that might be appropriate in some circumstances); it means finding ways to be humble servants today.

With this two-part approach in mind, we are now ready to look at Genesis 1 and attempt to understand it in its context. We cannot do full justice to this rich passage here; more thorough analysis can be found in several books mentioned in the Bibliography.

Notable Features of Genesis 1

At this point, I would encourage the reader to find a Bible and read Chapter 1 of Genesis (through Genesis 2:3). In this section, I will highlight a few aspects of the passage that are particularly relevant for our discussion.

¹ Luke 15:11-32

² A concept that we see again in the humiliation of the Cross.

³ *So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet.* I thank Dr. Carl Hofmann for this example.

In verse 2, we see imagery of primeval chaos (“a formless void”). This imagery would have been very familiar in the Ancient Near East, where most societies had myths about a god or gods battling the forces of chaos. However, the Genesis story is very different from those myths. Here, God does not have to struggle to overcome the chaos – God simply speaks his effective word.

In verse 5, we see the first declaration of a “day,” which is a prominent pattern throughout the chapter. The Hebrew word translated as “day” (*yôm*) can have a range of meaning similar to our word “day.” Biblical scholars are agreed that the most natural way to read it in most contexts (including this one) is as a normal 24-hour day. However, it can also be used to refer to a different, perhaps indefinite, period of time, much in the same way we might say “in the day of the dinosaurs” or “back in my grandfather’s day.”

Verse 6 introduces something important for our discussion – the “dome” that God makes to separate the waters above from the waters below. Older translations use the word “firmament,” and some modern translations use “sky” or “expanse” (which, as we shall see, partly misses the point). To understand this in context, we need to know the way the people of the Ancient Near East viewed the structure of the world (in other words, their *cosmology*). This structure, which is common to many ancient peoples, is shown in Figure 2 below.

In the cosmology of the time, the Earth was thought of as flat, sometimes round like a pancake or sometimes square like a piece of bread (hence the phrase “four corners of the Earth”). It was surrounded by water, both beneath the Earth (the source of wells and springs) and above the Earth (the source of rain). The waters above were held back by a solid dome that provided space for life. The sun, moon, and stars were usually thought of as connected to the dome, perhaps like lamps hung on the wall of a tent. Rain came through the opening of “windows” in the dome.⁴ Genesis 1:6 uses the specific Hebrew word for this solid dome that everybody believed to be above them. Of course we now know that there is no such dome;⁵ we might think about why Genesis gives God credit for creating something that doesn’t actually exist.

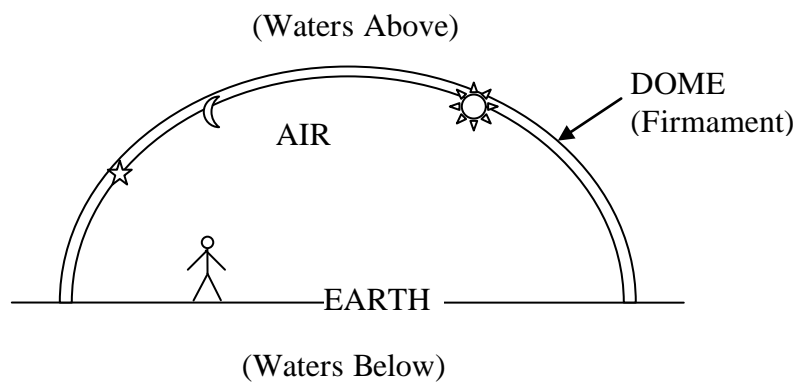


Figure 2. Basic elements of cosmology as understood by people of the Ancient Near East. Note the solid dome holding back the waters above the Earth.

⁴ We see this in Gen. 7:11 where both the waters below and waters above participate in supplying the Flood: *all the fountains of the great deep burst forth, and the windows of the heavens were opened.*

⁵ The proposal that the dome and waters above once existed but disappeared during the Flood does not work, because the same structure is spoken of in the present tense in the post-Flood Psalm 148.

In verse 11, we see the first instance of an important concept known as *mediated creation*. We often think of creation only as direct acts of God, but here God says “let the earth put forth vegetation,” and in verse 12 it is the earth that produces the vegetation. In a sense, the earth is doing the creating – of course not by its own authority, but in response to God’s sovereign command. This pattern is repeated in verses 20 and 24, where God’s creation, rather than being portrayed as direct, is mediated through other created things acting on God’s behalf. This imagery of natural processes (under God’s authority) bringing forth life has led a few people to say that in these verses the Bible is teaching the theory of evolution. That does not seem justified to me, but one can at least say that the picture is consistent with a gradual process where God uses nature (which God created) to accomplish God’s creative purposes.

In verse 16, we see the creation of the sun and the moon. Scholars point out that the text avoids using the normal Hebrew words for “sun” and “moon.” This is probably because those words were similar to the names of the sun gods and moon gods of nearby cultures. The writer of Genesis, instead of using language that might suggest divinity, puts the sun and moon in their place by simply calling them a big light and a smaller light, not gods but only lights created by God. We also see this demotion of other gods in the way the end of the verse describes the creation of the stars. Astrology was widespread at the time, but here the stars rate only a few words – these bodies that many viewed as determining destinies are almost an afterthought, like “Oh, I almost forgot, God also made the stars.”

In verses 26-28, we see the important concept of the creations of humans in the “image” of God, which is closely connected with the (sometimes controversial) ideas of “dominion” and “subduing” the Earth. While whole books have been written on what this “image” means,⁶ for our current purposes we note that many Old Testament scholars see this primarily in terms of a responsibility that God has given humans to rule on his behalf. This does not justify taking our “dominion” as license for exploitation of the rest of God’s creation; instead it gives us the responsibility to rule as God would desire, and we see throughout Scripture that God wants human rulers to conduct themselves as humble stewards and servants. It is also notable that all humans are said to image God, which provides a Biblical basis for universal human dignity in contrast to other cultures where this privilege was only for kings and the ruling elite.

The final theme in this passage is the Sabbath; we see in 2:2-3 an explicit connection between the creation story and God setting aside the Sabbath as a hallowed day.

How Have Christians Interpreted the “Days” of Genesis 1?

On the surface, it seems like Genesis 1 might be saying some things that relate to science. It talks about the origin of things in nature, and seems to give a sequence and a time frame. This has been a topic for Christian (and Jewish) interpreters for thousands of years, with much discussion (especially after it became clear around 1800 that the Earth was very old) about how to interpret the six “days.” Here, we will list various ways Christians have dealt with this over the years, then we will look at some of them more closely. Some of these are more reasonable than others, but it is useful to see the whole list. Note that these are not all mutually exclusive – the truth could be a combination of two or more of these positions.

1. *Six 24-hour “literal” days.* This is the common view adopted by the “Young-Earth creationist” movement. We will discuss this position in more detail below.

⁶ See for example the book by Middleton listed in the Bibliography.

2. *Each “day” is 1000 years.* This is based on the Biblical passages that say that with God one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years like one day.⁷ It was occasionally advocated by those who noted that some of the “days” in Genesis 1 seemed to contain more activity than could easily fit into 24 hours, but it still does not allow enough time to allow for the age of the Earth now accepted by science.
3. *“Day-age” view.* This takes advantage of the range of possible meanings for the Hebrew word translated as “day,” saying that each of the days in Genesis refers to a longer period of time such as a geologic age. The most prominent recent advocate of this approach is Dr. Hugh Ross, who has an active ministry called Reasons to Believe. We will discuss the day-age approach in more detail below.
4. *“Gap” theory.* This is also known as “ruin and restoration.” This theory suggests that Genesis 1:1 reports an original creation, and then between verses 1 and 2 is an unreported “gap.” Within this gap, vast ages of natural history take place, followed by some cataclysm (usually associated with the fall of Satan) which “ruins” the Earth, leading to the “formless void” we see in Genesis 1:2. Then, the rest of Genesis is viewed as describing not God’s original creation but a “restoration” in six 24-hour days. This does allow for the large age of the Earth, and was somewhat popular in the 1800s, but Old Testament scholars see no basis for reading such a “gap” into Genesis or for reading the creative days as a restoration. The position retained adherents through the 20th Century in large part due to its inclusion in the notes of the *Schofield Reference Bible*, which was widely used by fundamentalists in the early and mid-1900s.
5. *Days of proclamation.* This view attempts to simultaneously maintain the “days” as normal 24-hour days while allowing for vast geologic time. It hypothesizes that Genesis describes six 24-hour days on which God said “let there be ...” but that the actual creation was then carried out over a longer time.
6. *Days of revelation.* This is also referred to as “visionary days.” It maintains six literal 24-hour days by having the “days” be six days in which the events of creation were revealed to the writer of Genesis (usually assumed to be Moses). As with the “days of proclamation,” this attempt to make the days refer to something other than the time frame in which the creation happened is not taken seriously by most Old Testament scholars.
7. *“Analogous” days.* This has some things in common with the “day-age” view and with the “framework” view discussed below. It says that Genesis is describing real events at some level, but that the six days are God’s workdays, which are not the same as ours. This usually goes along with the “Sabbath pattern” view in observing that our Sabbath is analogous to God’s seventh day.
8. *Sabbath pattern.* This view says that the main purpose of the six-day structure is to provide the pattern for the Sabbath that God calls his covenant people to observe. It is clear that this must at least be part of the meaning – we have already noted the direct connection made in Genesis 2:2-3 between the Sabbath and the way in which God is portrayed as working on six days and resting on the seventh.
9. *Literary framework.* This view says that the six days are a way of organizing the story, with no relation to human time. This literary structure has been observed for a long time; the

⁷ Psalm 90:4; 2 Peter 3:8.

leading recent advocate of this view has been Meredith Kline of Gordon-Conwell Seminary. While proponents of this view agree that the order and length of the “days” has no relation to our chronology, they differ as to whether or not the descriptions of specific events in the passage can also be viewed as literary constructions rather than actual events. The literary framework of Genesis 1 will be discussed further below.

10. *Building God’s cosmic temple.* This view, recently popularized by Dr. John Walton, says that in its Ancient Near East context Genesis 1 is not describing material origins at all, but rather the functioning of God’s creation, and that the imagery is that of the cosmos as a “temple” being built for God to reside in (God takes up residence [rest] on Day 7).
11. *Inspired (monotheistic) reworking of Babylonian myth.* This view emphasizes the influence of cultures surrounding Israel when Genesis was written. The Babylonians were probably the biggest influence, but there were similar things in other cultures like the Canaanites and the Egyptians. They had all sorts of gods and goddesses. Babylonian mythology had a battle between the water goddess Tiamat and Marduk, who was the god for the city of Babylon. As the Babylonians told the story, their god Marduk won and sliced Tiamat in half, and those halves of the water goddess became the waters above and the waters below like we have in Genesis 1:7. Then Marduk goes on to do more creating, not exactly the same as Genesis 1, but similar in many ways. This view would say that, in inspiring Genesis, God took this story that was already familiar, and retold it in a new way, making clear that there was just one god.
12. *Instantaneous creation.* This was suggested by St. Augustine 1600 years ago. Augustine was influenced by Greek philosophy, which caused him to say that a perfect God would not need any time at all to create. So he suggested that the entire creation had been instantaneous, and that the six days was a literary device in order to convey the story to humans in an accessible way.

Before we look at some of these in more detail, it is important to note that faithful Christians have believed all of these. This should tell us that the interpretation is not clear-cut, and that it is wrong to say that any particular one of these is the only acceptable Christian interpretation.

The 6x24-Hour View

In looking more closely at some of these views, we might as well start with the most common, that these are 24-hour human days. Most scholars would say that in terms of the Hebrew words, forgetting about context, that is the most natural way to read it. It has probably been the most common Christian view through the years. But there are problems with this even before we get to any science. For example, we have the Sun created on Day 4 – how could there be days and mornings and evenings before the Sun? We also have a seventh Day (God’s Sabbath) that other passages in the Bible suggest is unending, not a 24-hour day.

And, with regard to the evidence in nature, this view just doesn’t work. This isn’t the place to go into that, but we have many independent witnesses in God’s creation testifying that these events unfolded over millions or billions of years. While science shouldn’t be allowed to lord over Scripture, if we have an area where it is not clear how to interpret, observing God’s world can be one of the tools we use to sort out what the right interpretation might be.

There actually is one way to preserve this 6x24-hour interpretation. This is known as the “appearance of age” position. This says that things are really young, but when God created them

he made them appear old. This position actually has some popularity, but what does it say about God? It makes God into a deceiver, who filled his creation with phony evidence testifying to history that never happened. That would not seem to be consistent with God's character as revealed in Jesus and in Scripture.

The “Day-Age” View

The day-age view, interpreting each “day” as a long period of time, is probably the second most popular among conservative Protestants. It produces less conflict with the evidence in nature, as it allows for the great age of the universe and the Earth. However, there are still some problems in making Genesis “line up” with the scientific evidence. Even before we get to the science, there is the problem that the order of events in Genesis 2 doesn't match that in Genesis 1.⁸ From the standpoint of agreement with science, the biggest discrepancies are with the order in which some things are created; such problems of sequence cannot be made to “line up” no matter how long the days are. The most prominent sequence problem is that science tells us the Sun and stars (created on Day 4 in Genesis) appeared long before the Earth (Day 1 or Day 3, depending on how you read it). Genesis also has fruit trees (Day 3) and birds (Day 5) appearing earlier than they do in the scientific sequence. The day-age view also has the problem of the “dome” or firmament created on Day 2, which science tells us has never existed.

The day-age view is the prime example of an approach that tries to make everything line up with science. When faced with the difficulties mentioned above, some of its advocates have produced convoluted interpretations, such as saying that the Sun, Moon, and stars were not *really* created on Day 4 as a straightforward reading of the text says, but only became visible to an observer on Earth (even though no Earthly observers existed yet).⁹ Such efforts are motivated by a strong conviction that it is necessary for the descriptions of Genesis to be scientifically accurate in order for Scripture to be trustworthy. Before proceeding further, we should examine the merits of this approach to Scripture and see if there is a better alternative.

Concordism and Accommodation

When faced with Biblical passages that seem to touch on scientific matters, there are two different mindsets we can take as we approach the text. The important distinction is between “concordism” and “accommodation.”

The doctrine of Concordism would affirm the following: *Every scientific and historical statement in the Bible, even those unrelated to the message of a particular passage, must always line up 100% with the factual truth.* If one comes to Scripture with this assumption, then it becomes essential for everything to line up with science.

The doctrine of Accommodation would affirm the following: *God¹⁰ can and sometimes does accommodate his revelation to the limited knowledge of the recipients in order to communicate effectively. Therefore, on matters peripheral to what God intends to reveal, God does not*

⁸ For example, in Genesis 1, man and woman are created together at the end of day 6, after the animals. In Genesis 2, the man is created, then God creates the animals (and Adam names them), and only after none of the animals is found to be a suitable companion is the woman created from Adam's rib.

⁹ Another example is trying to make the birds of Day 5 into winged insects.

¹⁰ Throughout this Chapter, for the sake of simplicity I portray God as the author of Scripture. This should not be taken to imply a simplistic “dictation” view where God directly provides the words, but instead should be taken as shorthand for “people writing Scripture under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.”

*necessarily correct erroneous or oversimplified views held by the inspired writers as a result of their cultural setting.*¹¹ With this view, any particular passage in which the science is not the main point may be scientifically accurate, but it does not have to be. It allows the possibility that God might have chosen to communicate in terms of commonly understood concepts of the writer's culture, even if they were mistaken. If we could measure the degree to which Genesis, for example, "concord" (agrees) with science, a follower of concordism would not be happy unless the degree of concord was 100%, while someone who affirms accommodation would not object to any result between 0 and 100%.

The doctrine of accommodation is not some recent liberal invention; it played a significant role in the thinking of the great reformer John Calvin, who famously said,

For who even of slight intelligence does not understand that as nurses commonly do with infants, God is wont in a measure to "lisp" in speaking to us? Thus such forms of speaking do not so much express clearly what God is like as accommodate the knowledge of him to our slight capacity. To do this he must descend far beneath his loftiness.

John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book I:13:1.

Calvin is saying that communicating with humans is like baby talk from God's standpoint; God lowers himself to our level, and sometimes that means not correcting our misunderstandings if they concern things that don't matter.

Similar ideas were expressed by renowned conservative Presbyterian Benjamin Warfield:

[An inspired writer could] share the ordinary opinions of his day in certain matters lying outside the scope of his teachings, as, for example, with reference to the form of the earth, or its relation to the sun; and, it is not inconceivable that the form of his language when incidentally adverting to such matters, might occasionally play into the hands of such a presumption.

B. B. Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible*

Given these two different ways of approaching Biblical passages that touch on science, how do we judge whether concordism is right, or whether God accommodates his revelation? God is certainly capable of overriding the ignorance of Biblical writers and correcting their science. But God doesn't have to.

The best way to resolve this question is to look at the Bible and see what God actually did.¹² When we do that, we find that any time a scientific matter is mentioned (which is not very often), the science is simply the knowledge of the time, which in some cases isn't right. For example, Jesus referred to the mustard seed as the smallest of all seeds.¹³ While that is how it was generally thought of, there are smaller seeds. Does this make Jesus a liar? No, because he was not teaching about seeds, he was teaching about the Kingdom of God. If he had said "the 43rd smallest seed" or whatever was scientifically accurate, it would have distracted from the message. In Leviticus, a passage about animals being clean and unclean says that the hare chews its cud,¹⁴ which biologically isn't true. People thought this, and it looks like God didn't bother to correct it because the point of clean and unclean wasn't biology, it was to set God's people apart. People 3000 years ago believed there was a solid dome above the Earth holding back the waters above,

¹¹ I thank Paul Seely for helping to sharpen my thinking on this issue.

¹² I think problems in many areas could be avoided if we received Scripture on its own terms and refrained from deciding in advance how we think the Bible is supposed to be.

¹³ Mark 4:31

¹⁴ Leviticus 11:6

and there it is in Genesis 1 (and other places in the Bible) – God apparently allowed that because he had more important messages to convey.

So, it seems that God has done some accommodating in Scripture, as Calvin suggested. A more recent way some people have talked about this is to say that Scripture is incarnational.¹⁵ God is at a level we can't reach; his thoughts are higher than our thoughts. The incarnation refers to God becoming fully present in a human, Jesus, to meet us at our level. We can see God's accommodation in Scripture similarly, as God meeting us at our level.

It might be helpful to consider why concordism remains popular, despite abundant evidence that it does not provide a faithful description of the Bible we actually have. I can think of two major reasons for its persistence.

The first factor that has promoted concordism is modernism. In modern society, we have forgotten how to tell stories, and we tend to see only scientific statements, or factual reporting like a newspaper, as "true." If truth is conveyed with figurative, unscientific language, that is second-class truth at best to the modern mind. Such thinking has dominated Western society since the Enlightenment, but it is not how the Biblical writers thought. We know God can tell stories to communicate truth, because Jesus frequently taught that way. Sometimes our speech betrays this unbiblical modernism, for example when people say they might have to "settle" for a figurative interpretation of Genesis 1, as though it is a disappointment if God told a story rather than writing a textbook. To talk about it in that manner is saying that some of God's communication is second-class truth, and that Jesus was a second-class teacher.

A related contributor to the popularity of concordism is fundamentalist approaches to the Bible. Modern fundamentalism insists that the Bible be "perfect" by the standards of modern Western rationalism, standards that would have been foreign to the Biblical writers. Sometimes a slogan for this approach is "God cannot lie," but let's think about whether it is fair to call accommodation a lie. As I write this, a couple I know is expecting their second child. Like many parents, they are telling their two-year-old about the "baby in Mommy's tummy." Are my friends liars? After all, the stomach is not the uterus. If we do not condemn these loving parents for communicating in a scientifically untrue way, we should consider that a loving God might also refrain from rigid scientific accuracy in order to communicate effectively with us.

My Reading

At this point, I should outline the way I see Genesis 1. In the classification used earlier in this Chapter, it is a combination of options 8, 9, 10, and 11. I do not claim certainty or complete knowledge. But this is not just my interpretation – this is approximately what most Old Testament scholars would say, except for the ones who reject the idea of accommodation.

In the Old Testament, the biggest danger and temptation to Israel was idolatry – going off and following the gods of the Babylonians and the other surrounding cultures. In that context, it makes sense that the Bible would begin with a message against idolatry.

One of the most powerful ways to get a message across is to tell a familiar story, but give it a new twist. Jesus did this in the Last Supper – the Passover was the familiar story for the Jews, so Jesus has a Passover meal, but in the midst of the meal he is changing things, telling them that he is the sacrificial lamb, that it is in him that God's people will find redemption. Making use of

¹⁵ See the books by Enns and Wright listed in the Bibliography.

Preparation	Population
<u>Day 1</u> : creation of light (day) separation from darkness (night)	<u>Day 4</u> : creation of sun (for the day) creation of moon, stars (night)
<u>Day 2</u> : creation of firmament/dome separation of waters above from waters below	<u>Day 5</u> : creation of birds (fly under dome) creation of fish (in waters below)
<u>Day 3</u> : separation of land from sea creation of vegetation	<u>Day 6</u> : creation of land animals creation of humans (given plants for food)

Figure 3. “Framework” structure of Genesis 1.

familiar symbolism to convey these things was probably more effective than if he’d given a speech laying it out like a theology textbook.

In Genesis 1, we see symbols and stories in the background that would have been very familiar to Israel. Things start with watery, chaotic nothingness. We see hints of the Babylonian creation myth. The cosmology, the structure of the universe, is the familiar structure that everybody believed (see Figure 2 earlier in this Chapter). At the same time, it is a radically different story. God does not correct the cosmology, but what does change is the more important part, the theology. We don’t have a bunch of gods battling and slicing each other in half. We have one God, who doesn’t have to win battles because he’s the only God, and who simply brings all of creation into being by his effective word, including the parts like the sun and the moon that other people viewed as gods.

What about the six days? I’m convinced by the scholars who say it is a literary framework, a topical way of arranging things, with no relation to human time (except that it illustrates the Sabbath pattern for God’s people). We don’t have time to get into that in detail,¹⁶ but in Figure 3 I have sketched the basic structure. The “days” are in a topical arrangement, a framework of preparation and population (or “formation and filling”), where in the first three days God separates and makes boundaries and prepares spaces for his creatures, and then in the next three days God populates those same spaces, in an order that matches the first three.¹⁷

So, this is a theological message, not a scientific one. The cosmology is a familiar backdrop assumed by people of the time and which (consistent with the doctrine of accommodation) God didn’t bother to correct. Genesis 1 is a powerful rejection of the idolatry of the surrounding nations, reminding Israel of the one true God they are supposed to follow. The message is organized in a six-part framework that provides nice literary structure, and that reminds God’s people to be people of the Sabbath – not like their slavedrivers back in Egypt, but people who pause from their labors to worship their Creator and Redeemer.

Implications

What does this understanding mean for relating science and Christian theology? First, it eliminates alleged conflict between Genesis and science, because it makes clear that Genesis is not teaching science. If people try to tell us that science has disproved the Bible, we can say no, at most it has disproved some people’s interpretation. Also, we should make sure at the appropriate

¹⁶ See the books by Atkinson, Blocher, and Hyers in the Bibliography.

¹⁷ In the related framework of Walton’s “cosmic temple” view, days 1-3 define needed functions and days 4-6 describe the installation of functionaries to meet those needs.

time that our children are taught about the real theological message of Genesis, so they don't get caught up thinking that their faith depends on interpretations that not only don't hold up in the real world, but that dishonor the Scripture by asking it questions it is not trying to answer.

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