

Keen insights into Genesis 1–3 flawed by analogical days approach

Interpreting Eden:
A guide to faithfully reading and understanding Genesis 1–3

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Vern Poythress is Distinguished Professor of New Testament and Biblical Interpretation at Westminster Theological Seminary and author of many books and articles on topics related to science and the Bible. His latest work, *Interpreting Eden*, offers guidance on how to properly interpret Genesis 1–3, and has a foreword by D.A. Carson. The book presents quite a juxtaposition of praiseworthy and problematic arguments. It contains a good number of thorough analyses and correct conclusions that biblical (young-earth) creationists should find very helpful. At the same time, a significant portion of *Interpreting Eden* is devoted to unsound reasoning against 24-hour creation days and in favour of the mistaken analogical days view. This review will highlight what Poythress gets right and respond to what I believe he gets wrong.

Continuity with previous work

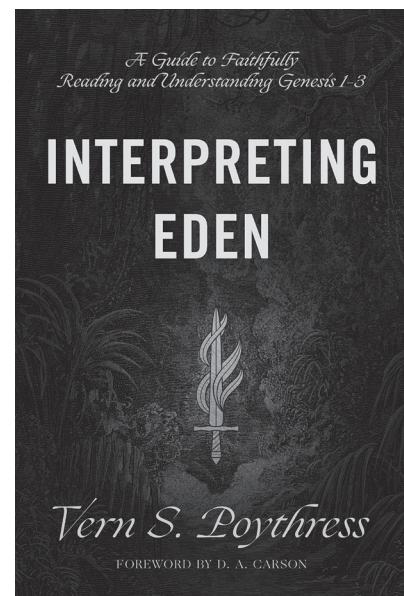
First, an aside. For those who have followed Poythress’s work carefully, there is not much new here. Many of the themes of this present work were formerly discussed in his 2006 book, *Redeeming Science*,¹ which was reviewed in this journal.² Although *Interpreting Eden* does develop and

elaborate on these topics, most of the chapters are slightly modified versions of nine articles that Poythress had previously published in the *Westminster Theological Journal* (p. 16). Regardless, it is convenient to have all this material in one place and organized into a coherent whole.

Areas of agreement

Except for a few qualifications and quibbles sprinkled here and there, creationists can largely agree with the material Poythress presents in parts 1 and 2, as well as his four appendices. Poythress supplies a summary at the end of part 1 (in chapter 7) of 15 hermeneutical principles for interpreting Genesis, all of which are either correct or only in need of slight modification. It is only in his last section, part 3, where more serious concerns arise, so these will be addressed below.

Here are some particulars Poythress gets right. He affirms inerrancy (chap. 3), and he takes several professing evangelicals to task for interpreting Genesis in a way that undermines biblical authority—including Peter Enns,³ Paul Seely and John Walton (chaps 4 and 9), and Kenton Sparks, including his misrepresentation of Calvin (Appendix C). He critiques their theologically liberal ideas that (1) God ‘accommodated’ by allowing scientific errors in the text (Appendix B), and that (2) the ancients—including the author(s) of Genesis—had faulty views of science which they incorporated into their writings, such as a belief that the sky consisted of a solid dome which held back a heavenly ocean (figure 1). Poythress’s critiques are spot on, and



I recommend creationists familiarize themselves with his arguments, since the myths which he demolishes are extremely pervasive in the literature of theistic evolutionists and in academia generally.

Poythress also affirms that the Bible has primacy over science (chap. 4). He says that scientific evidence may prompt us to rethink our interpretation of Scripture, but only if this change can truly be derived from considerations of Scripture alone, apart from science. Scientific claims are not to be used as trump cards over Scripture, Poythress insists (pp. 58–60).

In addition, Poythress takes Genesis to be a true, historical account (p. 124), stating that the genre of its overall structure is prose narrative (p. 119). He regards Adam not just as an historical figure, but also as the first man, not having descended from apes, but who was uniquely created by God from dust (pp. 191–194).

Positions creationists should consider

In a few areas, Poythress delves into topics about which we biblical creationists differ among ourselves. Regarding most of these, my own opinion is that Poythress’s arguments

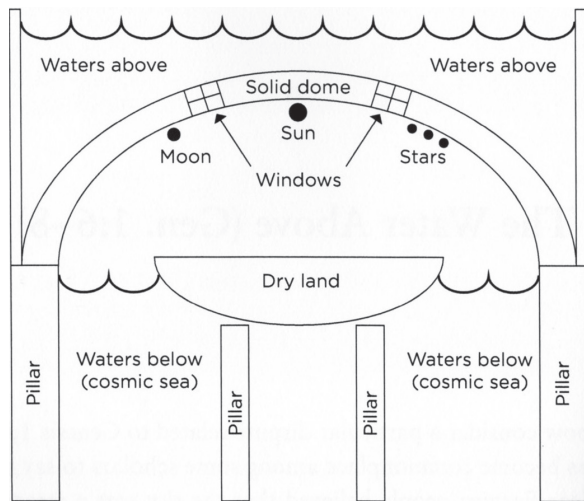


Figure 1. A typical graphical representation (from *Interpreting Eden*, p. 172) of the erroneous cosmology that many modern scholars allege is portrayed in Scripture. The Bible's authors are regularly accused of having depicted the sky as a solid dome, with a heavenly sea above and a flat earth below. Poythress effectively critiques this view as something read into, not out of, the Bible and other ancient texts.

are solid and his interpretations are correct. He is to be commended for laying out a clear case and interweaving numerous lines of evidence to support his conclusions. Three examples follow.

Genesis 1:1 as the first event

First, Poythress maintains that Genesis 1:1 is the initial event of creation, not a summary statement to describe all of Creation Week (p. 145). In Appendix A, he carefully and convincingly dismantles the arguments in favour of the summary view given by Bruce Waltke, and he offers positive reasons to affirm the initiation view instead.

Non-postulational language

Next, Poythress defends the position that Genesis describes natural phenomena from the perspective of ordinary observers, and is not 'theorizing' about more technical modern scientific concerns. Quoting from Bernard Ramm, he says that "the language of the Bible is non-postulational with reference to natural things" (p. 74). This means that, when Genesis 1 describes the moon as the "lesser" of the

"two great lights", for example, it makes no commitment to whether the moon generates its own light as opposed to reflecting it, and it makes no commitment to the moon's absolute size in comparison to other heavenly lights. All the description means is that, for ordinary observers, the moon is the second brightest light in the sky, after the sun.

Similarly, Poythress says that the Bible often portrays the cosmos as a house or tent, but this is meant to be colourful imagery, not a physicalistic theory (pp. 87, 137–139). It would be a mistake, therefore, to see references to God's stretching out the heavens "like a tent" as allusions to the modern cosmological concept of the expansion of space. More likely, it is a poetic way of highlighting the fact that God created the sky overhead, which is visibly expansive in its extent from one horizon to another—much like a tent stretched overhead.

More examples could be presented, but these few should suffice to illustrate the principle, which can help to correct mistaken interpretations by both liberal and conservative exegetes. The Bible does not promote a faulty scientific cosmology, but neither does it contain much, if any, *advanced* scientific revelation—as opposed to making true statements about the observable natural order, including how and when God brought that order into being. One might argue about whether this principle has any exceptions, but I am convinced it is at least true in the main.

The waters above

Last, Poythress applies the aforementioned principle to Genesis 1:6–8

(Day 2 of Creation Week), and concludes that the mention there of water above the expanse refers to clouds, plus any other invisible water vapour in the sky that contributes to precipitation. He devotes chapter 9 to a defense of this position and a critique of the 'heavenly sea supported by a solid sky' view.

Here too, although some creationists may disagree with his conclusions, Poythress's excellent reasoning should be thoughtfully considered. Among his several points are the following. First, the language in Genesis 1 is phenomenal with some flexibility built into the term 'heaven'. Second, the Israelites and their ancient Near Eastern neighbours understood that rain and dew came from clouds. Third, the Bible often equates the heavens with clouds as the source of rain, using parallelism and other literary devices. Fourth, Genesis speaks of things that were relevant to ordinary Israelites—which is true of clouds but would not be true of a distant heavenly sea. I would add that the same criticism could be made of alternative creationist proposals, including the icy shell-aggregate models of Hartnett (at the edge of the solar system)⁴ and Humphreys (around the universe as a whole).⁵

Areas of disagreement

Given his careful reasoning throughout much of this book, it is unfortunate that Poythress promotes the analogical days approach to Genesis 1. His case falters in the following four areas.

The standard for measuring a day

Poythress tries to maintain that there is a difficulty in defining the length of the creation days, since whatever standard one might select to define it, he says, cannot be extended back to Creation Week. Why not? Readers should prepare for some convoluted reasoning.

First, Poythress says, it would be circular to define a day as 24 hours,

and then define an hour as 1/24 of a day. It would indeed. But terms are defined by common usage, and nobody takes the term ‘hour’ to mean 1/24 of just any arbitrary definition of the term ‘day’. Rather, we experience the passing of time; ‘hour’ and ‘day’ are designated as particular lengths we commonly experience. This is no tautology.

But Poythress anticipates the response that the language in Genesis implies that the days are the same length as the solar days we now experience. In reply, he claims that this response treats the sun’s apparent circuit through the sky as the standard for the length of a day. Yet he says this cannot be the case for the first three days of creation, since the sun was not there until the fourth day. Further, he insists, even the appeal to ‘length’ assumes a standard for measurement, and this standard “must already be in place *during* the first three days, not merely afterward” (p. 218).

This is clearly mistaken. Consider an analogy. If a modern story were to be written about Day 3 of Creation Week, and in it some of the trees God created were described as over 100 feet tall, will those familiar with American units comprehend the author’s meaning? Of course they will, even though the basis of the unit—a human foot—didn’t appear until Day 6, and the more precise standardization of that length and its division into 12 inches came later still. (If someone professed not to know whether these ‘feet’ mentioned on Day 3 were approximately 12 inches or instead miles long because of an absence of a standard for ‘feet’, we would accuse such a person of being obtuse.)

In the same way, the readers of Genesis may know the length of a day even when it is used to describe a time when the source of its length was absent. Strangely, Poythress himself comes near to acknowledging this when he points out that the Bible describes the amount of time Joshua had to defeat his enemies at Gibeon



Figure 2. How can a day’s worth of time pass without the motion of the sun on Days 1–3 of Creation Week? According to Poythress himself, this occurred in another instance, when the sun stood still for Joshua in the battle for Gibeon. But Poythress fails to appreciate that the approximately “whole day”, during which the sun “did not hurry to set” (Joshua 10:13), refers to a particular amount of ‘clock’ time, not an indefinite period of personal activity. Thus, Poythress’s appeal to Joshua’s circumstances as a justification for his claim that there is ambiguity in the length of the creation days ends up backfiring on him.

as “about a whole day” (Joshua 10:13). According to Poythress’s own interpretation, the sun was motionless (figure 2) in the sky during that time (p. 245), yet the term ‘day’ remains intelligible. Its meaning as a unit of time can be distinguished from, and should not be rigidly equated with, the source of that definition (whether the source is the apparent motion of the sun, the light/dark cycle, or the length of a typical human workday).⁶

Moreover, if it is comprehensible to refer to the elapse of a day’s time even when the light/dark cycle has been paused, how much more does it make sense when the light/dark cycle is present? This is what we have in Genesis 1. So, even if, for argument’s sake, we grant Poythress’s overly stringent criterion that the standard for defining a day must be present on each day, why could not the light/dark cycle serve as the standard? Poythress answers that without the sun, we cannot know how long those cycles took. After all, he points out, throughout Creation Week there were transitions in God’s activity from His initial, special work of creation to His ongoing work of providence. So it follows we cannot assume God operated by the same rules both while creation was taking place and afterward.

But if that’s where Poythress wishes to take the argument, employing the sun to serve as the standard will not tell us how long the creation days were either, as he later admits (p. 249). That is, if the cycle of day and night during Creation Week might not correspond in length to what we recognize as day and night today, for all we know the sun might have proceeded at a different rate as well. By this line of reasoning, we could not be certain what *any* of the words mean in Genesis 1, as we would have no standard by which we could compare those terms with things that go by their identical names today. Obviously, this presents a major problem. The words in Genesis 1, including ‘day’, must retain their meanings or else it would be impossible for us to understand God’s inspired communication to us about His creative acts.

‘Day’ as an indefinite cycle of personal activity

Poythress next advances his own view, that the days in Genesis 1 represent cycles of personal activity (such as work/rest for the first six days) or inactivity (such as God’s rest on the seventh day), rather than definite units of elapsed ‘clock’ time.⁷ He says, “The six days may be interpreted as God’s ‘workdays,’ the times of his personal

activity” (p. 266), and he insists that “Genesis 1 does not specify the length of each day, as measured by a modern technological timekeeper” (p. 250). Furthermore, he claims that even the period between ‘evening’ and ‘morning’—mentioned at the close of each creation day—refers only to a temporary hiatus from personal work as opposed to a particular length of time as might be measured by a clock (p. 267).

However, here Poythress ought to apply his own distinction between the *meaning* of a word and its *referent* (p. 301 ff.; similar to the ‘sense’ and ‘reference’ distinction proposed in 1892 by logician Gottlob Frege). The term ‘day’ commonly does *refer* to a period of work and rest, because God designed human beings to operate according to such rhythms—labouring in the daytime and sleeping at night. The 24-hour days in our common experience unavoidably include some combination of personal activity and inactivity. But the *meaning* of the term ‘day’ is defined by usage and context, and Poythress does not offer any exegesis to show that in Genesis 1 the term ‘day’ inherently carries the *meaning* of a rhythm of personal activity with no fixed length. Nor does Poythress show that ‘evening’ *means* an indeterminate period of time in which work ceases, or that ‘morning’ *means* an indeterminate time period in which work resumes.

In fact, Poythress has not demonstrated that the Hebrew terms for ‘day’, ‘evening’, or ‘morning’ are *ever* used to mean such things. Poythress is actually proposing new definitions for these words, but his whole case depends on an erroneous assertion that ‘day’ cannot mean a definite unit of time unless the standard for its measurement is present during the period to which the term is applied. As already shown above, this is not so. Rather, the context clues in Genesis demand that the creation days *mean* the time it regularly takes for one complete cycle of light (daytime) and

dark (nighttime). Thus, they *refer* to time periods of 24 hours.

Order of events

Another area where Poythress drops the ball is in his discussion of the order of events in Creation Week. On the positive side, unlike proponents of the Framework Hypothesis, Poythress does admit that the Genesis 1 sequence is presented “basically in chronological order” (p. 271). But he fudges with the word ‘basically’, and this tactic opens the door for him to arbitrarily rearrange things in an attempt to create a match between the Bible and deep time. He appeals to a paper by Bruce Waltke to suggest there may be some “shuffling of chronology”, although he is not dogmatic on this point and confesses that the evidence for it is ‘subtle’ (p. 270).

Unfortunately, though, Poythress goes on to offer a proposed harmony between the creation account and what he calls the ‘scientific’ (actually, evolutionary) account, in which he cherry picks points of agreement and glosses over the glaring contradictions (pp. 273–274). What are we to do with the fact that Genesis places fruit trees before fish, for example, when old-earth scientists tell us differently? No problem, Poythress says, quoting Derek Kidner, the trees simply “anticipate their chronological place in order to be classified with vegetation” (p. 271). But if Poythress is allowed to invoke topical rearrangements like this without the slightest exegetical grounds for adjusting any particular item, his position becomes unfalsifiable. An honest reading, however, in keeping with the way the New Testament authors interpreted Genesis, shows many blatant inconsistencies between Genesis and deep time.⁸

Problems brushed aside

Finally, there are a number of exegetical problems with Poythress’s old-earth, analogical days approach, which he either ignores or brushes aside too

quickly. For instance, Poythress does not interact with the New Testament material which takes human history to be co-extensive with natural history—a position fatal to all old-earth views.⁹ Also, the problem that all old-earth views face in placing human death, animal death, and carnivory prior to the Fall is only addressed in a single footnote (p. 159). There, Poythress simply asserts that the Bible does not preclude animal predation or death before the Fall, and he says that human death alone began after Adam sinned. He does cite a couple of verses and list a few references for more information, but creationists have already extensively refuted the weak sorts of arguments noted as his proofs. Not only is Poythress wrong about animal death, he fails to appreciate that his position on human death alone is inconsistent with his old-earth perspective.¹⁰

There are still other interpretive problems that Poythress does not discuss in this book, such as the incompatibility between deep time and the global catastrophe of Noah’s Flood. In a previous book, Poythress took the position that the Flood was a local event, and he explained away the Bible’s description of floodwater prevailing above the mountains by 15 cubits (Genesis 7:20) as snow piling up on mountain peaks.¹¹ This is clearly not what the author of Genesis intended, considering all the references in the account to rain, water rising and subsiding, mountain peaks appearing as the waters abated, and so on. Also, when the judgment was over, God promised Noah that He would never again send so great a Flood to destroy the earth, while He said not a word about safety from a second great blizzard.

Conclusion

Despite the serious missteps in this book regarding the creation days and the age of the world, *Interpreting Eden* does deserve attention. Poythress is a

useful ally to biblical creationists in many respects and he has a number of insights that creationists would do well to embrace. But Poythress himself would do better to abandon all the contrivances of his analogical days approach and instead come to embrace biblical creation.

References

1. Poythress, V.S., *Redeeming Science: A God-centered approach*, Crossway, Wheaton, IL, 2006.
2. Murata, M., God-centred or man-centred? *J. Creation* 23(1):23–24, 2009.
3. See footnote on p. 69.
4. Hartnett, J., The ‘waters above’, *J. Creation* 20(1):93–98, April 2006.
5. Humphreys, D.R., New time dilation helps creation cosmology, *J. Creation* 22(3):84–92, December 2008.
6. Poythress claims that the standard for the term ‘day’ in Joshua 10:13 is not a solar day, but the ‘experiential’ passage of time. He says it refers to “about a whole day’s worth of human activities” (p. 245). But what does he mean by “a whole day’s worth”? Clearly, this does not mean ‘as long as the human activity lasted’, or it would be tautologous. Rather, it must refer to a fixed unit of time, perhaps the length of time humans are commonly occupied with work during the daylight hours (8 hours?), or the amount of time the sun is ordinarily up (12 hours?), or the time during which humans are typically awake (16 hours?), or even the full 24-hour cycle. In any of these cases, though, Joshua’s ‘whole day’ means a definite amount of time which could be converted to other units, like hours, and it clearly refers to a time period that is around 24 hours or less. So this is of no help to Poythress’s claim that the creation days are ambiguous in terms of ‘clock’ length. The sun stood still for a particular amount of clock time, and the context of Genesis 1 likewise demands that the creation days are specific periods of approximately 24 hours, not open-ended periods of personal activity.
7. Poythress takes the seventh day to be everlasting (p. 265), but refers readers to his earlier book, *Redeeming Science* (ref. 1), for the argumentation. His reasoning there is spurious and has been answered elsewhere. See, for example, *Is the seventh day an eternal day?* *Creation* 21(3):44–45, June 1999.
8. Sarfati, J., Evolution/long ages contradicts Genesis order of creation, *Creation* 37(3):52–54, July 2015.
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11. Poythress, ref. 1, p. 129.