

DOES 2 PETER 3:8 MEAN THAT THE UNIVERSE COULD BE VERY OLD?

This verse reads: "But, beloved, be not ignorant of this one thing, that one day with the Lord is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day."

AN UNWARRANTED INTERPRETATION OF THIS VERSE

Here is how many have interpreted this verse: Since "one day with the Lord is as a thousand years," this means that the days of creation were really indefinite time periods -- thus, the six-day structure of Genesis chapter 1 is really very long, possibly billions of years, so there is no conflict with long chronologies of naturalistic development.

This is what people sometimes mean when they say there is no conflict between science and Scripture -- that there is no conflict between the evolutionary chronology and this flawed interpretation of 2 Peter 3:8. There is indeed no conflict between the Bible and science, but there *is* conflict between the Bible rightly understood, and the evolutionary interpretations of science.

This common interpretation overlooks the last part of 2 Peter 3:8 -- "a thousand years is as one day." Using the same kind of reasoning with this second phrase as many people use with the first phrase, a long time period could be compressed into a short one. This way, 2 Peter 3:8 could be used to show that Genesis 1 covered much less than 6 days of creation! **In other words, 2 Peter 3:8 doesn't really tell us anything about chronology.**

HOW TO UNDERSTAND 2 PETER 3:8 AND THE DAYS OF CREATION

Since 2 Peter 3:8 says nothing about chronology, what is it about? In reading and understanding the Bible, context is always extremely important. **The context of 2 Peter 3:8 is about the future coming of the Lord, not the past history of creation.** In other words, 2 Peter 3:8 is about the future, not the past. To apply 2 Peter 3:8 to the creation is to wrest it from its context.

Yet the claim that 2 Peter 3:8 must imply a long creation chronology continues to persist. Why? Perhaps because of the belief that the word "day" in Genesis chapter 1 doesn't have a definite meaning. If the creation sequence in Genesis 1 can be indefinitely long, wouldn't it be consistent of God to imply this elsewhere in His Word?

So understanding 2 Peter 3:8 correctly ultimately hinges on answering the question, How do we know a "day" in Genesis 1 is really a day, not an undefined period of time? The answer is **context, context, context.**

In Genesis 1, "day" always occurs with the words evening, morning, and a number (1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th, 5th, or 6th), as in "the evening and the morning were the first day" (Genesis 1:5).¹ **This**

phraseology is absolutely never used anywhere in the Bible except to mean an ordinary day -- what we now call a 24 hour day.²

The word "day" alone can have many meanings -- and does elsewhere in the Bible -- but in the linguistic context of Genesis 1 it has only one meaning -- an ordinary (24 hour) day. Also, the linguistic structure of Genesis 1 guarantees that the six days were consecutive with no gaps between them.³

Some have tried to evade this conclusion by claiming that Genesis 1 is mere poetry and therefore is only symbolic. Even if Genesis 1 were poetry, however, this claim will not stand, for before the invention of printing, a poetic syntax was an aid to memorizing concrete content within the system of ancient rhetoric.⁴ **Thus we cannot assume that ancient poetry was abstract and symbolic as with modern poetry.** We cannot truly say that a poetic syntax for Genesis 1 means that it did not convey the concrete information intended by the context of its words.

Further, Genesis 1 is not actually poetry after all. The first poetic passage in Scripture is Genesis 4:23, sometimes called "The Song of the Sword." Indeed, Pfeiffer notes that, "This is the first bit of poetry quoted in the Bible."⁵

Dr. James Barr, Hebrew scholar and Oriel Professor at Oxford University, has written: "Probably, so far as I know there is no professor of Hebrew or Old Testament at any world-class university who does not believe that the writer(s) of Genesis 1 through 11 intended to convey to their readers the ideas that (a) creation took place in a series of six days which were the same as the days of 24 hours we now experience; (b) the figures contained in the Genesis genealogies provided by simple addition a chronology from the beginning of the world up to latter stages in the biblical story . . ."⁶ Barr is not saying he believes this -- after all, he credits Genesis with more than one writer, not just (or even) Moses -- but he is claiming that **within the linguistic context, there is no other possible conclusion.**

We have now seen that a day in Genesis 1 cannot be a long indefinite interval, that Genesis 1 contains no time gaps, and that Genesis 1 is a non-poetic statement of the creation as it happened in time -- a short time.

There is one additional attempt people commonly use to try to force more time into Genesis 1. This is the claim that there are time gaps in the genealogies in Genesis 5 and 11. If there are gaps in these post-creation chapters, then by analogy perhaps the length of the creation sequence in Genesis 1 could be expanded to billions of years. The argument for these gaps revolves around whether the word "begat" in Genesis 5 and 11 can signify a distant descendent, or only a son.

The answer is that elsewhere in the Bible, "begat" does signify a descendent other than a son. **In the context of the genealogies in Genesis 5 and 11, however, it apparently means son-ship.** Jude 14 calls Enoch the "seventh from Adam." Jude 14 is true only if the genealogy in Genesis 5 has no gaps up to Enoch. The

conclusion that Genesis 5 has no gaps up to Enoch can be reasonably extended to all of Genesis chapters 5 and 11.

Further, the meaning of "begat" in the genealogies is actually irrelevant to whether there are gaps in the chronology of Genesis: **"Gaps in genealogies . . . do not prove gaps in chronologies.** The known gaps all occur in non-chronological genealogies. Moreover, even if there were gaps in the genealogies of Gen. 5 and 11, this would not affect the chronological information therein recorded, for even if Enosh were the great-grandson of Seth, it would still be the case that Seth was 105 years old when Enosh was born, according to a simple reading of the text. Thus, genealogy and chronology are distinct problems with distinct characteristics. They ought not to be confused."⁷

In other words, even if the genealogies in Genesis 5 and 11 could be shown to have gaps, the chronology of Genesis does not. Arthur Custance was the strongest modern proponent of the gap theory, sometimes called the "ruin-reconstruction theory." The gap theory claims that an indefinite gap of time existed between Genesis 1:1 and Genesis 1:2. Custance was open to finding gaps in the Genesis 5 and 11, because this would lend support to his belief that there is a gap Genesis 1. But he could find no gaps in Genesis 5 and 11:

"We are told again and again that some of these genealogies contain gaps: but what is never pointed out by those who lay the emphasis on these gaps is that they only know of the existence of these gaps because the Bible elsewhere fills them in. How otherwise could one know of them? But if they are filled in, they are not gaps at all! Thus, in the final analysis the argument is completely without foundation"⁸

THE REAL MEANING OF 2 PETER 3:8

If 2 Peter 3:8 isn't about past chronology, then what is the Lord really saying in 2 Peter 3:8? **The whole second chapter of 2 Peter is about the last days leading up to the return of the Lord.** Peter is reminding his readers that before the Lord comes back, certain things will happen:

- (1) scoffers will appear, v. 3;
- (2) they will be lustful, v. 3;
- (3) they will mock the promise of Christ's coming, v. 4;
- (4) they will use uniformitarianism as an excuse for knowing the Lord can't come back to intervene in the natural world -- so sure are they that God is less powerful than the "laws of nature," v. 4;
- (5) they will be willfully ignorant of certain things, i.e., they will know the truth, but they will shove the truth aside in their minds, v. 5;
- (6) they will deny specifically the truth of the Flood, v. 5.

Since all this has now happened for the first time in the 2000 year history of the church, it appears that we are close to the

end of the present age. All these preconditions to Christ's return would take a long time to develop -- it's now been 2000 years, and Peter, inspired by the Holy Spirit, realized that some believers over the centuries would think that God has forgotten His promise of returning. **So Peter points out in verse 8 that what seems like a long future preceding Christ's return is really just what God has planned.** We shouldn't count the many days and years since Jesus was last on earth and say, "He has forgotten His promise."

Then Peter points out (v. 9) that God the Father is not "lazy" or "forgetful" ("slack") about fulfilling His promise. Instead, God wants all who will to have a chance to repent before Christ returns.

So what does 2 Pet. 3:8 really mean to us as Christians? **Along with v. 9 (remember the importance of context!), it means that Christ is not trying to "rush" His coming.** He is longsuffering to those who have not repented. He is graciously waiting for all who will repent to do so before He returns.

Conclusions

Christians should be strong salt like Jesus instructed in Matthew 5:13. Salt slows down but does not stop the spoilage of food. Christians should be delaying -- *but cannot stop* -- the spoilage of our culture.

Christians need to help people see through unbiblical theories and thought patterns, so they can see Christ as Creator and Redeemer. Is each one of us who calls himself a Christian doing what he can to delay the decay of our culture and point people to Christ as Redeemer and Creator?

Notes. Bolding in quotations is added.

1 J. Henry, "The Days of Creation Were Six Literal Days," <creationconcepts.org>, 2001.

2 J. Henry, "A Critique of Progressive Creationism in the Writings of Hugh Ross," *Creation Research Society Quarterly*, Vol. 43 no. 1, June 2006, pp. 17-18; J. Henry, "Critique of Progressive Creationism," <creationconcepts.org>, 2005.

3 For a thorough discussion of the lack of gaps in Genesis 1, see J. Henry, 2006, op. cit., p. 18.

4 Francis A. Yates, *The Art of Memory*, U. Chicago, 1966, pp. 2-4.

5 C.F. Pfeiffer, *The Book of Genesis*, Baker, 1958, p. 27.

6 Letter to David Watson, April 23, 1984; cited in Ken Ham, *The Lie: Evolution*, Master Books, 1987, p. 53; also cited in John D. Morris, *The Young Earth*, Master Books, 1999, p. 31.

7 James Jordan, "The Biblical Chronology Question," *Creation Social Sciences and Humanities Quarterly*, Vol. 2 no. 2, 1979, p. 12.

8 Arthur C. Custance, *The genealogies of the Bible*, Doorway Paper #24, Doorway Papers, 1967, p. 3, <custance.org/Library/Volume7/Part_V/Chapter1.html>.