

What Is R.C. Sproul's Position on Creation?

from [Karisa Schlehr](#) Feb 09

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We are commonly asked for a clarification of R.C. Sproul's position on Creation. Here is his commentary on the Westminster Confession's phrase "...in the space of six days."

In the beginning, to create, or make of nothing, the world, and all things therein whether visible or invisible, in the space of six days; and all very good. In the Genesis account of creation, we read; "So the evening and the morning were the first day" ([Gen. 1:5](#)). This narrative proceeds from the first day to the sixth, each time referring to "the evening and the morning" and numbering the day. On the seventh day, God rested ([Gen. 2:2](#)).

In our time a considerable number of theories have arisen denying that the creation, as we know it, took place in twenty-four-hour days. Common to these theories is the acceptance of the dominant scientific view that the earth and life on it are very old. Many consider the biblical account to be primitive, mythological, and untenable in light of modern scientific knowledge.

This crisis has resulted in several attempts to reinterpret the Genesis account of creation. We are reminded of the sixteenth century, when Copernicus and his followers repudiated the old Ptolemaic view of astronomy. They argued that the center of the solar system is not the earth (geocentricity), but the sun (heliocentricity). It was a sad chapter in the history of the church, which had believed for more than fifteen hundred years that the Bible teaches geocentricity, when it condemned Galileo for believing and teaching heliocentricity. Both Luther and Calvin opposed Copernicus's views, believing them to undermine Scripture's authority.

Actually the Bible does not explicitly teach geocentricity anywhere. Scripture describes the movements of the heavens from the perspective of someone standing on earth: the sun moves across the sky, rising in the east and setting in the west. We use that same language today. The church thought that because the Bible uses this kind of descriptive language, it was therefore teaching something about the relationship between the sun and the earth. This is a clear case of scientific knowledge correcting the church's interpretation of the Bible.

There are two spheres of revelation; the Bible (special revelation) and nature (general revelation). In the latter, God manifests himself through the created order. What God reveals in nature can never contradict what he reveals in Scripture, and what he reveals in Scripture can never contradict what he reveals in nature. He is the author of both forms of revelation, and God does not contradict himself.

The church has always taken the position that all truth meets at the top, and that science should never contradict Scripture. Scientific discoveries, however, can correct the theologian's faulty understanding of Scripture, just as biblical revelation can correct faulty speculations drawn from the natural order. When the scientific consensus on a particular point is on a collision course with the unmistakable teaching of Scripture, I trust Scripture before I trust the speculations and inferences of scientists. That is consistent with the history of the church and Christianity. We believe that sacred Scripture is nothing less than the Creator's truth revealed.

We have a problem not only with a six-day creation, but also with the age of the earth. Is the earth a few thousand years old or billions of years old (as scientists today insist)? Although the Bible clearly says that the world was created in six days, it gives no date for the beginning of that work. It would be a mistake to become embroiled in too much controversy about the date of creation.

In a Massachusetts college I taught Introduction to the Old Testament to two hundred and fifty students. Because the class was so large, we met in the chapel. Once I opened the old pulpit Bible to Genesis 1, and at the top of the page I read “4004 B.C.” I did some research to see how that date had been determined. In the seventeenth century an archbishop, James Ussher, made some calculations based on the genealogies in Genesis 5 and 11 and other chronological clues in the Old Testament. He even pinned down the day of the week and the time of day when creation occurred. I hasten to tell my students that we must be very careful to distinguish between the text of Scripture and additions to the text. In defending the biblical authority, we are not obligated to defend a theory based on the speculations of a bishop in times past.

If we take the genealogies that go back to Adam, however, and if we make allowances for certain gaps in them (which could certainly be there), it remains a big stretch from 4004 B.C. to 4.6 billion years ago. We also have the problem of the antiquity of the human race. It seems as if every time a new skeleton or skull is discovered, scientists push back the date of man’s origin another million years.

Scholars have proposed four basic theories to explain the time from of Genesis 1–2:

1. the gap theory,
2. the day-age theory,
3. the framework hypothesis, and
4. six-day creation.

Gap Theory

The gap theory was made popular by the *Scofield Reference Bible* (1909), which more than any other single edition of Scripture swept through this country and informed the theology of an entire generation of evangelicals. It became the principal instrument for propagating dispensational theology throughout America. In this Bible, [Genesis 1:1](#) reads, “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth,” and verse 2 reads, “And the earth *became* without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep.” Other Bibles read, “And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep.” Verse 2 describes what most scholars consider to be the as-yet-unordered, basic structure of the universe—darkness, emptiness. Then the Holy Spirit hovers over the waters (v.2) and God says, “Let there be light” (v.3). Thus came the light and then the creation of the heavens, fish, birds, animals, and so on.

The Hebrew word in verse 2 translated “was” is the very common verb *hayah*, which ordinarily means “to be.” *Hayah* means “to become” only in special circumstances, which are not present here. The *Scofield Reference Bible* translates verse 2 as “became” instead of “was” in order to facilitate the gap theory. As a result, only verse 1 refers to the original creation. Verse 2 then refers to a cosmic catastrophe in which the originally good and properly ordered creation became chaotic, dark, and fallen. After this period of darkness (the “gap”), God recreates the universe which could have been created billions of years

ago, followed by a gap of billions of years (including the “geologic column” of immense ages), after which God returned to his distorted creation and renovated or reconstituted it relatively recently. The gap theory has also been called the restitution hypothesis, meaning that the creation narrative in Genesis is not about the original creation, but about the restitution of a fallen creation.

An entire generation was fed this theory through the *Scofield Reference Bible*. However, Scripture nowhere explicitly teaches that the original creation was marred and then after many years reconstituted. The broader context of the whole of Scripture militates against the gap theory.

Day-Age Theory

According to the second approach, the day-age theory, each “day” of Genesis 1 may be an age. After all, one day in the Lord’s sight is like a thousand years ([2 Peter 3:8](#)). Also, expressions like “in the days of Noah” and “in Abraham’s day” can refer to open-ended periods. The Hebrew word *yom*, translated “day” in Genesis, can mean something other than a twenty-four-hour period, as it must in [Genesis 2:4](#), which refers to “the day that the LORD God made the earth and the heavens.” Accordingly, each “day” in Genesis 1 may refer to a thousand years, and perhaps even to millions of years. This will at least ameliorate some of the difficulties we have with those who argue for a gradual evolution of life-forms on this earth.

However, the day-age theory, like the gap theory, ignores the immediate context as well as the large biblical context. It ignores the fact that each of the six days of creation consists of an evening and a morning. If *yom* here means something like ten million years, then we need to give the words *evening* and *morning* the same kind of metaphorical meaning. From a literary, exegetical, and linguistic perspective, the day-age theory is weak. As a Christian apologist, I would not want to defend it.

The day-age theory tends to accommodate a theory of biological macroevolution that is incompatible with the Bible and purposive creation—the creation of all living things by the immediate agency of the sovereign God. Macroevolution teaches that all life has developed from a single, original cell, and that this happened through a somewhat fortuitous, chance collision of atoms, without an intelligent planner or Creator orchestrating the emergence of these species. Those who favor the day-age theory often link themselves with a position called theistic evolution, which grants the basic premises of biological evolution, but says that God, not chance, guided the process of evolution.

Macroevolution differs from microevolution. While the former teaches that all living things have developed from one original cell, the latter teaches that, over period of time, species undergo slight changes in order to adapt to their environment. Microevolution is not in dispute, either biblically or scientifically. Macroevolution has never been substantiated by observation or experiment, and it places its faith in an endless string of extremely improbable, yet beneficial chance mutations.

A frequent argument for macroevolution is the principle of common structure. All forms of life are made up of the same basic substances: amino acids, proteins, DNA, and that sort of thing. Because all living things have similar constituent parts, the argument goes, they must have developed from common ancestors. A common substance or structure, however, does not necessarily imply a common source. The fact that all forms of life are

made of the same basic building blocks neither negates the possibility of evolution nor substantiates it. One would expect an intelligent Creator to have made all life-forms with a similar design—one that works on this earth.

When teaching a university course to thirty upper-level philosophy students, I asked who believed in macroevolution. Almost all the students raised their hands. I then asked them to explain why they believed in it. Their only argument was “common substance, therefore common source.” Most said they believed it because they had been taught in school, and they assumed their teachers knew what they were talking about.

Macroevolution, in the final analysis, is not a question of biology or natural science, which rely upon experimented verification, but of history, which tries to interpret evidence left from the past in a coherent fashion. The discipline of paleontology, which studies the fossil record, claims to put evolution on a scientific footing, but it performs no experiments to substantiate evolutionary processes. It simply lines up similar fossils and infers that one creature must be related to another by common decent.

In the recent past in Russia, leading international scholars who favor macroevolution met. While comparing notes, they found that the weakest evidence for their theories is the fossil record. I remember reading the Royal Society’s bulletin at that time and thinking, “What other source matters?” The fossil record is the one that counts, and yet that is the one that militates against their theory. I read an essay recently in which a professor argued for macroevolution on the basis of certain geological formations. He argued for an old earth on the ground that stratifications in the rocks contain fossils, which indicates a uniformitarian process that took millions of years to produce the whole formation. He then determined the age of each stratum by determining the kinds of fossils contained in each. This is a blatant example of what logicians call begging the question. It is circular reasoning to date the fossils by the rocks, and then date the rocks by the fossils. That just will not work.

We now have good evidence that stratification of rocks proves the antiquity of nothing. Within days after the Mount St. Helens explosion had subsided, scientists discovered that the cataclysmic upheaval of that volcanic explosion had laid down exactly the same rock stratification that had been assumed would take millions of years to develop. In other words, Mount St. Helens proved that catastrophic upheavals can produce the same empirical data as twenty million years of gradual deposition. We will not get into uniformitarianism or catastrophism here, except to say that they have been attempts to accommodate macroevolution. This tends to support and popularize the theory of theistic evolution, and it also uses the day-age theory of Genesis—a dangerous thing to do.

Framework Hypothesis

The third approach, called the framework hypothesis, was originally developed by the Dutch scholar Nicholas Ridderbos. He argued that the literary form of the book’s first few chapters differs from that of its later chapters. Certain basic characteristics found in poetry are missing from historical narrative, and certain characteristics found in historical narrative are missing from poetry. For example, the book of Exodus, with its account of the Jewish captivity in Egypt, has genealogies, family names, real historical places, and an unmetred literary style (i.e., lacking a particular rhythm), making it clearly prose and historical narrative. After the account of the exodus, the book’s author inserts

the song of Miriam, which is in metered rhythm and is therefore clearly poetry. The literary structure before the song manifests all the characteristics of historical narrative, as does the structure following the poem.

Therefore, it is usually not difficult to distinguish between poetry and historical narrative in the Old Testament. But the opening chapters of Genesis, according to Ridderbos, exhibit a strange combination of literary forms. On the one hand is a discussion of the creation of a man and a woman who are given names that thereafter appear in genealogical accounts. In Hebrew literature this clearly signals historicity. The Garden of Eden is said to be set among four rivers, two of which we know were real rivers: the Tigris and the Euphrates. The style of writing is not metered or rhythmic, as Hebrew poetry normally is. All this indicates that the opening chapters of Genesis are historical narrative.

There are some anomalies, however. We find trees in this garden with strange names: “the tree of the knowledge of good and evil” and “the tree of life” ([Gen 2:9](#)). Had they been apple or pear trees, there would have been no problem. But what does a tree of life look like? Is the author of Genesis telling us that a real tree was off limits, giving it a metaphorical meaning as the tree of life? We are also introduced to a serpent who speaks. Because of these two features, some have argued that the literary structure of the opening chapters of Genesis was self consciously and intentionally mythological, or at least filled with legend and saga.

Ridderbos contended that the beginning chapters of Genesis are a mixture of historical narrative and poetry, with part of the poetic structure being the repeated refrain, “So the evening and the morning were the first day” ([Gen 1:5](#)), and so on. Ridderbos concluded that Genesis gives us not a historical narrative of the when or the how of divine creation, but a drama in seven acts. The first act ends with the statement, “So the evening and the morning were the first day.” The author of Genesis, then, is trying to show that God’s work of creation took place in seven distinct stages, which incidentally fit remarkably well into the stages identified by the modern theories of cosmic evolution.

Therefore, the framework hypothesis allows one to step into a Big Bang cosmology while maintaining the credibility and inspiration of Genesis 1-2. This is not history, but drama. The days are simply artistic literary devices to create a framework for a lengthy period of development.

In America, Ridderbos’s work was widely disseminated by Meredith Kline, who for many years taught Old Testament at Westminster Theological Seminary, then at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, and then at Westminster Seminary California. Because Kline endorsed the framework hypothesis, many people, particularly in the Reformed community, have embraced it, provoking a serious crisis in some circles. Some Reformed pastors today hold to a literal six-day creation, while others hold to the framework hypothesis, and yet they otherwise hold to the same system of orthodox theology.

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Six-Day Creation

For most of my teaching career, I considered the framework hypothesis to be a possibility. But I have now changed my mind. I now hold to a literal six-day creation, the fourth alternative and the traditional one. Genesis says that God created the universe and

everything in it in six twenty-four-hour periods. According to the Reformation hermeneutic, the first option is to follow the plain sense of the text. One must do a great deal of hermeneutical gymnastics to escape the plain meaning of Genesis 1-2. The confession makes it a point of faith that God created the world ***in the space of six days***.

Excerpted from [*Truths We Confess: A Layman's Guide to the Westminster Confession of Faith \(Volume 1\)*](#). In other settings, Dr. Sproul has also made a point of highlighting Dr. Douglas Kelly's book, [*Creation and Change*](#), as formative in his position on the subject of Creation.