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Chronology in Genesis 1-2 and the book *Genesis 1-4* by C. John Collins

The basic issue and the Collins book

Genesis 1:1 – 2:3 contains an account of the creation in six days by God (*'ĕlōhîm*). Somewhere in 2:3 or 2:4 (scholars differ), a second account begins which describes the creation of humankind, Eden, and the fall of humanity. To identify these as 'two accounts' implies neither that they contradict, nor that (necessarily) they come, as many claim, from different sources. It is just a self-evident feature of the text.

An important question is whether one or both of these accounts imply a chronology of events. If they do, then one conservative Christian view may hold that any scientific version of earth history will have to agree with the order given. If they don't then any such effort becomes pointless.

This present analysis will consider this in the context of the book *Genesis 1-4* by C. John Collins (2006). This book is one of the most sophisticated arguments for chronology in both Genesis 1 and Genesis 2 and so needs taking seriously. None of my analysis is to deny that Collins' book contains some useful insights, and good information. It is simply to consider the plausibility of his claims about chronology.

Collins asserts:

> I seek to read the text in the way a competent reader in the original audience would have done. (p.5)

He takes a discourse analysis approach. This means that he seeks to understand the genre, the semantic and background assumptions and so forth made by the writer. He also takes a conservative literary approach which implies looking at the way in which the main narrative may be supplemented and how language is used to convey meaning. Collins also asserts that we should consider 'how later texts use our text' (p.30) – which means looking at the Old Testament itself, the Apocrypha, Philo and Josephus (p.31) – the LXX, strangely, is not mentioned.

Collins takes as a key point that:

> In a biblical Hebrew narrative, the function of the *wayyiqtol* verb form… is as 'the backbone or storyline tense of biblical Hebrew narrative discourse.' … Other verb forms, when part of the narrator's presentation (as opposed to the reported speech of participants), are used for supplying background information: for example the 'perfect' (*qatal*) is used to denote events off

the storyline, while the 'imperfect' (*yiqtol*), 'converted perfect' (*weqatal*), and participle (*qotel*) denote activities with process aspect ('something was *happening*').(p.21)

Collins sees 'pericopes' as important, a pericope being a set of narrative verses which form one particular coherent sub-story, with a particular structure and emphasis. His understanding is that the account of the days in Genesis 1:3-2:3 and the account of Eden in Genesis 2:4-2:25, are two overlapping pericopes, meant to be read in harmony. Genesis 1 uses *'ĕlōhîm* as the creator figure, whilst 2:4 identifies this *'ĕlōhîm* for the reader as *yhwh 'ĕlōhîm* (Lord God) (p.40). He concludes (p.44) that the pericope in Genesis 1 is 'exalted prose narrative'. This is not the same as poetry, but it is not everyday prose. This, he says, means that we 'must not impose a 'literalistic' hermeneutic on the text'.

Some background interpretations

Collins has asserted that it is important to see how early Hebrews themselves interpreted passages, so what do we know?

My son Justin Marston presented a paper in *Science & Christian Belief* (2000) 12 (2), 127-150 on 'Jewish understandings of Genesis 1 – 3'. He looked at the early Jewish philosophical streams (*eg* Philo), the rabbinical streams, and mystical writings. Towering figures like Philo and Rashi (and most early rabbinical commentators) were quite explicit that chronology was not intended in the text. They tended to think that creation had been instantaneous. Philo even remarks

'At that time, indeed, all things took shape simultaneously. But, though all things took shape together, the fact that living organisms were afterwards to come into existence one out of another rendered necessary an adumbration of the principle of order in the narrative.'[1]

Another commentator on early Jewish thinking claims that:

The sages agree that the creation of the earth and sky was a single divine event and not a series of distinct occurrences spread out over six or seven days.[2]

So it is doubtful whether the Jewish readers saw it as necessarily literal or even chronological, though Collins does not seem to note this. He does note that Luke and Matthew give different orders for the temptations of Christ, and asks:

'Do the two accounts disagree? Only if the genre conventions imply a strict

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1   Philo *On the Account of the World's Creation…*67
2   Samuelson, N.M. *Judaism and the Doctrine of Creation* (1994) p. 115.

sequence in the storyline verbs.' (p.23)

If we then presume that the creation accounts are meant to be chronological (as he does), then it must be assumed that, unlike these aspects in the gospels, the genre conventions imply a strict sequence. He does not tell us on what basis this is assumed, given that many Jewish scholars themselves evidently did not believe it.

About historical Christian understanding he states:

It is probably safe to say that, prior to the rise of the new geology in the eighteenth century, most Bible readers simply understood the creation pe- riod to be one ordinary week. (p.123)

Actually this is not safe to say at all. He notes that 'a major exception is Au- gustine' (note 68), but gives the impression that Augustine was a lone figure. Collins does not mention Origen who was perhaps the most famous of Greek commentators and became very fluent in Hebrew. Origen believed totally in the inspiration and truth of Scripture but wrote around 220-30 AD:

What man of intelligence, I ask, will consider a reasonable statement that the first and the second and the third day, in which there are said to be both morning and evening, existed without sun and moon and stars, while the first day was even without a heaven? And who could be found so silly as to believe that God, after the manner of a farmer, 'planted trees in a paradise eastward in Eden' ... And... when God is said to 'walk in the paradise in the evening ... I do not think anyone will doubt that these are figurative expres- sions which indicate certain mysteries through a semblance of history...[3]

In our *Reason, Science and Faith,* we look at some of the other famous early Christian figures who did not take the 'days' literally. Justin Martyr refers to a kind of age-day theory as a thousand years is as a day to God. Hilary of Poitiers (c315-368) in *On The Trinity* is mainly concerned with the eternal nature of Christ, but adds that 'the creation of heaven and earth and other elements is not separated by the slightest interval in God's working.' Basil (c329-379) was well educated and aware of Greek secular learning. His famous *Homilies* on Genesis, however, were not philosophical treatises but *sermons* given before a group including workmen and artisans. *Homily 1* includes much discussion of 'beginning', and suggests that:

Perhaps the words "In the beginning he created" were used because of the instantaneous and timeless act of creation, since the beginning is something immeasurable and indivisible.

In *Reason, Science and Faith* we go on to look at the lack of literalism in other

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3   Origen *First Principles* Bk 4 chap. 3.

early Fathers, and note one writer saying that through Augustine's influence there were probably fewer biblical literalists on this in seventh century Ireland than modern Texas.

Any idea that chronology was central to the 'natural' way for Jewish and Christian scholars' understanding of it before modern geology is not accurate.[4]

Days of creation and chronology in Genesis 1

The basic structure in Genesis 1 is this:

Genesis 1:1-2: In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void…

Day one: God said let there be light and divided it from darkness to form day and night;

Day two: God said let there be an expanse (firmament) separating waters below and above the sky;

Day three: God said let the seas be gathered leaving dry land. God said let the earth bring forth vegetation;

Day four: God said let there be lights and let them be for signs and seasons. God made (*wayya'aś*) the 'two lights' (sun and moon?) – the stars (implication 'he made' but the verb is missing) also.

Day five: God said let the waters team and the birds fly. God created the sea and air creatures.

Day six: God said let the earth bring forth living creatures (land animals) God made (*wayya'aś*) the beasts of the field and creeping creatures. Then God said 'let us make (*wayya'aś*) humankind in our image'. God created humankind in his image.

Day seven: God rested.

The *Qal* form of the term *bārā'* (create) is used only for God. Outside creation week, a participle form of the verb (*bōrê'*) is used in Isaiah 45:7 for *creating* darkness, and in Amos 4:13 to say that God *is creating* the winds. A Hebrew verbal participle could mean a continuous action in past present or future, but here the context seems to indicate it is presently continuing. To Amos, God is *creating* winds – even though we all know of course that the winds are caused by meteorological cycles. God is *creating* through natural processes.

When we look at Genesis 1-2 itself we find the verb is used only in:

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4 The complexity of views through history can be seen in Stanley L. Jaki's *Genesis 1 Throughout the Ages* (1998), without accepting Jaki's own standpoint.

1:1   God created the heavens and the earth (according to Collins before the days started)

1:21 God created the great sea creatures and flying creatures

1:27 God created humankind in his own image – male and female

2:3   God blessed the seventh day because he rested from his creating work

2:4   When God created them (heavens and earth) in the day that God made them (also 5:1)

Actually, then, the particular *creation* activity denoted by *bārā'* occurred only on days five and six, and only in making sea creatures and flying creatures and in making humankind.

Collins joins various commentators who have suggested that Genesis 1:1-2 is not part of Day One. His argument is that Genesis 1:1-2 does not contain a Hebrew *wayyiqtol* verb, whereas the 'days' all begin with such a verb expressing God's wish 'and God said' (and some indeed repeat the phrase later during the 'day'). Collins basically argues that the use of *wayyiqtol* verbs indicates the main storyline or backbone of a Hebrew narrative, so this shows that 1:1-2 stands outside of this, indicating background before the days. Some scholars would see the parallels of structure in Genesis 1:1-3 and 2:4b-7 as supporting this.

So *could* 1:1-2 refer to an *indefinite* period before day one? Historically, the 'gap theory' (put forward in the early nineteenth century by Thomas Chalmers) was a version of this, suggesting a long gap during which the earth became without form and void before a week of re-creation started. This really does not fit with modern geology – even though some famous early geologists (like Adam Sedgwick) favoured it. Collins makes a good case that 1:1-2 is a kind of prologue to the majestic 'And God said' series, but the issue remains as to whether the Genesis writer intended 1:3 to be the start of a specifically chronological series.

A fundamental point in trying to make the days chronological is that, as Origen pointed out, whilst light and darkness start in day one, the sun, moon and stars seem to be made later in day 4. Young earth creationists claim that the word in 1:16 means 'made to appear' rather than 'made', or sometimes that before the fourth literal day the light came from some other source than the sun. Collins rejects all this, but then argues that:

> The verb *made* in Genesis 1:16 does not specifically mean 'create'; it can refer to that, but it can also refer to 'working on something that is already there'...or even 'appointed (p.57).

The verb 'made' (*'āśâ*) need not mean created *ex nihilo* (and even the term *bara'* for created allows that humankind were made from existing materials),

but it is hard to see how it could simply mean an 'appointment' without any significant change in structure/function. Collins goes on to say that 'the volitional form 'let there be' does not of itself require the sense of coming into existence.' Thus, he says, 'let there be light' is not a majestic creation of light, but just appointing it to a new task. Collins is very brief on this, and does not expand it; but we can ask:

1. How many of the 'let there be's' would Collins apply this to? For example, was the creation of the 'expanse' or the 'gathering of the seas' not some new initiative but just an appointment of what was already there? This would all seem very bizarre.

2. Would Collins restrict actual creation to where *bārā'* is used? So were the land creatures in day six only 'appointed' and not created? This would mean that most of the activities in the days are just appointments and not in any real sense creations.

3. Would the ancient writer really have used exactly the same Hebrew term in the same form (*wayya'aś*), in the same passage (or pericope) to mean two totally different things – create or appoint?

4. Collins emphasises looking at later Hebrew interpretations. The LXX was translated in the third and second centuries BC by a team of Jewish scholars fluent in Hebrew, and by his standards their understandings should surely be very significant. The LXX uses the identical Greek phrase (εποίησεν ο θεός) for God 'made' the luminaries (v.18) and God 'made' the sea creatures (v.21) and God 'made' the land animals (v.25) and God 'made' man (v.27). Evidently the many Jews who translated the LXX thought this was the natural meaning of the Hebrew terms in all these verses. To them, the Hebrew terms in context mean 'made' or 'created' – whether or not *bārā'* is used.

5. Of course God could have created sun, moon and stars with the forethought of future human navigation. But in what sense were they 'appointed' on day four, well after their creation but two days before humans arrived? Celestial objects have no consciousness to be aware of a new function, and humans were not yet there. So was it just that God had a sudden new thought on the fourth day that maybe the sun, moon and stars he had made some time earlier might be jolly useful for navigation to the humans he was thinking to create two days later? This seems to be taking a rather abstruse meaning in order to avoid taking the term (*'āśâ*) to mean what it means elsewhere throughout chapters 1 and 2.

Surely Origen was simply right in the third century. There is no way in which these can be made into simple consecutive days – whether for a strict age-day model, a young-earth model or a 'days-with-gaps-between' model. The term

in day 6 does not mean 'appointed' or 'appeared' but 'made', and it is not good exegesis to try to make it mean something totally different in day 4 which is within the same passage (in Collins' terms in the same 'pericope').

Chronology in Genesis 2

The basic structure of order in the Eden creation account is this:

2:5　no plant of the field was yet in the land/earth, and no herb of the field had yet sprung　up;

2:6　the Lord God had not yet caused it to rain upon the land/earth and there was no man to till the ground but a mist went up from the earth and watered the whole face of the ground;

2:7　then the Lord God formed man of the dust...

2:8　and the Lord God planted a garden in the East, and there put the man whom he formed.

2:18　Then the Lord God said 'It is not good for the man to be alone, I will make an ally comparable to him;

2:19　so out of the ground the Lord God formed every beast of the field and every bird of the air....

An initial chronology issue is that in Genesis 1:12 the plants ('*êśeḇ*) were made in day three, whilst in Genesis 2:5 they had explicitly not 'sprung up' until after humankind were created. Collins gets round this (pp.126ff) by noting that in Hebrew *ha'arets* does not necessarily mean the whole of planet earth, but simply 'the land', suggesting that here 'the land' meant a particular area of the earth at a particular time of year. Plants had sprung up elsewhere for a long time. So:

Our author [the Genesis writer] points us to a particular time of year, when the rains had not yet come, and hence the plants had not begun to grow (and there was no man who could artificially water the ground); but a mist – or rain cloud – was just rising. At this time of year, in some place called 'the land,' God formed the man. (p.127)

Because (Collins says) the pattern of wet/dry must have become established before these events for the dryness to make sense:

This event on the sixth day took place some unknown number of years after the plants first sprouted on the third day' (p.127)

Whilst it may be linguistically possible, it has to be doubted whether early Hebrew listeners would really have read all this into this text. What would be the point of pointing out the time of year in 'the land' as a background to God

planting a garden in Eden? When, later in Scripture, there is reference to 'the land' as some localised area, it is generally clear in context as to what 'land' is implied. But here it has no such context. Was Eden in 'the land'? Was it in the East of 'the land', leaving the rest dry or plantless?

As noted, one of Collins's main suggestions is that *wayyiqtol* verbs indicate a part of a main narrative. For the *wayyiqtol* in 2:8 ('the Lord God planted a garden') Collins rejects the pluperfect (as taken by the NIV) because he is happy that this particular garden was planted *after* man was formed in 2.7 (p.106 note 14) Whether this really is a 'natural' reading to ancient readers seems doubtful.

Yet Collins is prepared to *sometimes* make a *wayyiqtol* imply a pluperfect if it suits his version of chronology. Genesis 2:7 uses a *wayyiqtol* that God 'formed' (*wayyîser*) man from the dust and put in the garden the man he formed, and 2:19 a *wayyiqtol* that he formed (*wayyiser*) the animals. Collins (p.107 note 27) argues that the *wayyiqtol* verb in 2:19 should be taken as pluperfect. He refers in this to his 1995 paper[5] which it may therefore be useful to look at briefly. In this paper, Collins accepts as certain that:

> ...the normal way to express a pluperfect idea ... in Classical Hebrew narrative is by the use of the perfect verb form (also called the *qatal* form), commonly introduced in a narrative with a subordinating conjunction such as *'ăšer* or *kî*, or with some sentence element preposed to the verb. (p.118)

Classical Hebrew grammarians like Gesenius and Joüon allow for a *wayyiqtol* to imply a pluperfect only when consequent on a perfect verb form with a pluperfect meaning. Driver[6] allows only a 'exegetical' use as a comment on the preceding narrative as a whole. Collins notes that Driver is sceptical of a supposed pluperfect meaning in Gen 2:19 when it 'could have been easily and unambiguously expressed by a slight change of order.'

Collins then cites various critics of this, pointing to verses much like 1 Kings 21:8-9:

> And she (Jezebel) wrote (*wattiktōb*) letters in the name of Ahab and she sealed them (*wattahtōm*) with his seal and she sent (*wattišlaḥ*) letters to the elders and to the nobles who were in his city, who sat with Naboth, and she wrote (*wattiktōb*) in the letters saying...

All the verbs are *wayyiqtol* here, but the second 'wrote' clearly repeats the first, giving a kind of 'marked temporal overlay', where the storyline overlays a time segment that has already been covered.

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5 Collins 'The *Wayyiqtol* as "pluperfect": when and why', *Tyndale Bulletin* (1995) 46, 117-140.
6 Driver, S.R. *A Treatise on the Use of Tenses in Hebrew* (1892)

Collins suggests this is indicated when 'one or more of the following three conditions are met' (p.128):

1. Some anaphoric reference explicitly points back to a previous event.

2. The logic of the referent described requires that an event presented by a *wayyiqtol* verb form actually took place prior to the event pre sented by a previous verb.

3. The verb begins a section or paragraph.

The examples he cites generally very clearly indicate this. Obviously someone writes a letter before sending it – and even in English it would be rather odd and pedantic in the above example to say of Jezebel 'she had written in the letters saying', especially as this could imply some event prior to all this. To apply this to Genesis 2:19, Collins has to assume that Genesis 1 and 2 are unified accounts because 2:4 joins them, *and that both are intended to be chronological.* Obviously on *these* assumptions, the pluperfect in 2:19 *has* to be assumed because there is no other way to preserve chronology in both passages. But this does seem to be rather assuming what one wants to prove. *On the assumption* that the compiler of both passages intended both to be chronological and consistent, he *must have meant* 2:19 to be pluperfect. But it seems an unnatural way to read the text without this elaborate connection – and the examples like Jezebel above are far more immediate and obvious than this.

Again, also, Collins seems to ignore his own emphasis on looking at how later Hebrews saw it. Here the LXX translation again uses an identical translation (ἐπλασεν ο θεός) for 'God formed' for both man (2:7) and the animals (2:19). To make one perfect and the other pluperfect was evidently not in the mind of the early Jewish LXX translators fluent in Hebrew, and it is not a natural reading of the text. It arises only from a determined modern desire to harmonise the chronologies. That the LXX translators saw no such need is indicative of the kind of genre they thought the Scriptural creations accounts had.

It does seem as though Collins's presuppositions sometimes override implications even in later biblical text itself. Another example, though not about chronology, is his view of woman as made to be a 'helper'; he says:

> A 'help(er)' is one who takes a subordinate role (which is why it is so startling to read of God being the 'help' of his faithful ones, as in Deut 33:7 and Ps 33:20). (p.107)

If Collins followed his avowed principles, he would surely look at how the term *'ēzer* (help) is used in later Hebrew literature? Does Collins really think that the Psalmist in 33:20 was calling on God to be a kind of subordinate helper? It would not only be 'startling' but utterly unbelievably astounding! If we look up *'ēzer* (help) in William A. VanGemeren (ed.) *The New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis* Vol 3 p. 378, we find that the

term is overwhelmingly used for God, and when applied to a human ally it does *not* imply subordination but often alliance to a powerful Empire which turns out to be unable to help.

Later Collins argues that, whilst the first part of Gen 3:16 (childbirth pain) is a punishment for the fall, the second part 'Your desire shall be for your husband and he shall rule over you' is not. He says that the term 'rule over' does not convey the negative associations of dominate. Yet later he cites the obvious parallel Genesis 4:7: 'Sin is crouching at the door, its desire is for you but you must rule over it.' Surely this *is* a negative association? Cain is not being urged to have a kind of paternalistic pleasant rule over Sin, whilst Sin (in the words of modern patriarchalists) is 'joyfully submissive'? Here Collins's cultural idea of women as subordinate and properly to be ruled seems to overshadow how terms are actually used later in Scripture. Many of us will continue to see both parts of Genesis 3:16 as part of the judgment, and in the new Covenant the gender equality in Christ overturns this male domination in favour of the original 'allies comparable to one another'.

Collins' conclusions on chronology

Collins does not sympathise with the fantastic young earth creationist attempts to construct a revised astrophysics and geology and preserve seven consecutive literal days. Much of his analysis usefully recognises the layers in the text, for example, applying the prophecy in Genesis 3:15 to the crushing of Satan by the coming Messiah. At heart he wants to harmonise Scripture with real science.

So he identifies three possible approaches to chronology in Gen 1-3:

1.   Harmonisation is impossible, or at least unwarranted.

2.   The days are not ordinary, and at least some of them involve longer elapsed time than 24 hours.

3.   The days have spaces of time between them.

The first of these, sometimes called the 'framework theory', classically goes back to Philo, Origen, Augustine and the like, and many of us in *Christians in Science* today, for example, would advocate it. It implies that the Genesis writer never intended chronology, any more than Matthew and Luke did in recording the temptations of Jesus. The passages are polemic and theological in intent, not scientific.

The age-day theory can actually be traced back to Buffon in *Epoques de la Nature* (1778), but was influentially revived by the Evangelical G. S. Faber in his *Genius and Object* (1823), and had its most illustrious pre-1859 geological advocate in the geologist Hugh Miller in his *The Testimony of the Rocks* (1857).

Miller actually portrays the days as visionary or prophetic – but argues that they are also indicative (with some caveats) of time periods in history.

The third was noted amongst various views by Alan Hayward and was once advocated by a prominent UK Intelligent Designer who has since changed his mind.[7] However there seems no real exegetical basis for it, and it does not remotely fit with the geology of the last 200 years.

Collins expresses his own view as:

> The days are broadly sequential, which means they are successive periods of unspecified length; but since this sequence is part of the analogy, it is possible that parts of the days overlap and that events on a particular day may be grouped for logical rather than chronological reasons. (p.129)

Hugh Miller, of course, in his famous nineteenth century age-day ideas, had to similarly fudge it in practice. But if the age-day idea doesn't really work anyway, why should we trouble to try to interpret identical Hebrew phrases differently in the same passage to preserve it? If events on a particular day really are 'grouped for logical rather than chronological reasons' then what is the point of trying to jiggle the language to make it all chronological?

Chronology and conclusions

The young earth creationist's seven literal consecutive days, a strict age-day approach, or a literal days with gaps between idea, all have to find a way to get around the apparent absurdity of the sun moon and stars being created after plants in Genesis 1, and the differing orders of events given in Genesis 1 and 2. Collins's book is clearly one of the most linguistically sophisticated attempts to do this. If it fails to make a convincing case, then it seems unlikely that anyone will succeed. Surely we can conclude that early Jewish translators and commentators, Philo, Justin Martyr, Origen, Augustine and so on were right. The Genesis writer intended to convey that creation was the orderly, majestic and intentional act of the One God identified as *yhwh ʼĕlōhîm* - but he no more intended to imply strict chronology than the accounts of the temptations of Jesus as given by Matthew and Luke. We can acknowledge the Divine inspiration, but respect the non-chronological genre of the accounts as understood by those interpreters closest to the original language in which they were written.

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7　Alan Hayward *Creation and Evolution,* (1985) notes the work of Robert Newman, in Newman, R.C. & Eckelmann, H.J. *Genesis One and the Origin of the Earth,* (1981).