

THE “DAYS” IN THE CREATION STORY

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In the discussion between Dr Verseveldt, Dr Popma and Dr Dam about Genesis 1, taken up in a few issues of *Christelijk Middelbaar Onderwijs*, running from 23 January to 29 May 1941, an old problem is broached anew. This discussion is important, because it clearly reveals that two ways of thinking still prevail in Christian circles regarding the question of how we are to understand the creation story and, in particular, the days of Genesis 1. The conception of those authors who confer no real character to the “days” still stands next to the conception of those who think it necessary to maintain the reality of these “days.”

The first of the above-named conceptions is especially widespread among theologians who are seriously interested in the results of natural science and among Christian natural scientists. They hold the “days” to be a logical or ideal order, according to which the author of the story would have grouped certain contemporary conceptions of heaven and earth. They reject the “naïve-realistic conception of Genesis 1”¹ as conflicting with the results of natural scientific research. “Whoever asks if the days of Genesis 1 were *real* days of 24 hours, or on which day the insects were made... has a totally incorrect view of the Bible chapter in question.”² “We ought therefore to adhere to the “idea” and not the letter of the story; I imagine such an ideal conception to be the only proper one.”³

Dr Verseveldt follows Prof. Noordt zij closely, who in his work **Gods Woord en der Eeuwigen Getuigenis** (1931) sharply attacks every effort “to consider Genesis 1 as an historically accurate account of the creation act of God.”⁴ Both the anti-geological theory, which takes the “days” to be 24-hour periods, and the concordantist theory, which takes them to be periods of longer duration (among others Bettex), are rejected

¹ Verseveldt.

² Ibid, p. 206.

³ Ibid, p. 207.

by these authors; however, they also reject the ideal theory which considers the creation story as a myth and replaces it with evolution.

Prof. Noordtzij regards the harmonising effort of both the anti-geological and the concordantist theories as “repugnant bungling.” Genesis 1 must not, according to him, be regarded of and for itself, but must be seen in the totality of Holy Scripture, in which a very close connection is made between creation and re-creation, and in which the first is always seen in the light of the second.

Over against Verseveldt and Noordtzij, stand those who believe they must maintain the reality of the “days” of creation. These authors accept, with Luther and Calvin, and with the Lutheran and Reformed Dogmatists, the literal interpretation of the “days.” They emphasize however, that these are not “ordinary” but “extra-ordinary days,”⁵ “work-days of God,”⁶ “creation-days,”⁷ “God’s work-days.”⁸ A day is also spoken of as a “light-continuum”⁹ and as a “creation-era of God.”¹⁰

Prof. Aalders has worked out the most detailed of these interpretations. He writes that “on the whole it is not possible to give the precise duration of the creation-days in the temporal measure which we ourselves are accustomed to use.”¹¹ According to him, there is much to be said for the idea “that all creation days must be determined in the same manner and be judged by the same criteria. All six creation days were spoken of in precisely the same manner in Genesis 1.”¹² It is “highly doubtful” that we can impose our way of measuring time on God’s work-days. Scripture reveals nothing to us about their duration; it says only that they are marked by light, which each time had a beginning and an end. They could well have been either longer or shorter than our

⁴ Prof. Noordtzij. **Gods Woord en der Eeuwige Getuigenis**. Kampen: J H Kok, 1931, p. 111.
⁵ H Bavinck. **Gereformeerde Dogmatiek**. Kampen: J H Kok, 2nd Edition, 1908, Vol. 2, p. 532.
⁶ G C Aalders. **De Goddelijke Openbaring in de eerste drie hoofdstukken van Genesis**. Kampen: J H Kok, 1932, p. 250.
⁷ J C Sikkkel. **Het boek der Geboorten**. Vol I, Amsterdam: J W A van Schaik, 1906. p. 118. [The original article gives the reference as page 78. This is either a misprint or refers to a different edition.]
⁸ J A Hendriks. “De doelbewuste gang van het scheppings verhaal.” *Gereformeerde Theologisch Tijdschrift* 35 (1934) no. 2, pp. 87ff.
⁹ Aalders, *ibid*, p. 252.
¹⁰ K Schilder. **Wat is de hemel?** J H Kok: Kampen, 1935, p. 300.
¹¹ Aalders, *ibid*, p. 248.

usual days. “There is every reason to regard the use of the word ‘day’ as a human manner of speaking (an anthropomorphism).”¹³ Nevertheless, it is “...not advisable to deny all temporal reality to the creation days as the work-days of God.”¹⁴

This is a brief summary of the two current ways of thinking about the days among students of science who are faithful to Scripture. In what follows an attempt will be made to synthesize the correct elements in both ways of thinking, making use of a recent new insight in the problem of time.¹⁵

Adherents of both the aforementioned ways of thinking take it for granted, that the creation document does not present us with myth or poetry, but with revelation of the historical fact of the creation of heaven and earth. But they also agree that this story is written *pro mensura humana*, for comprehension by mankind. It may not be regarded as an adequate description of creation, for this in fact occurred before human history.

Augustine, in his work *De Genesi ad litteram*, already showed that what in reality is created and is also known by God as a whole, can be known by mankind in his structure and manner of originating only when it is broken down into its parts. Heaven and earth are the whole of God’s creation. Heaven is God’s world, the *completed* creation, which in the decree of God stands foremost as the meaning and goal of history, but which in the execution of this decree comes last. From the beginning of history, all factors which come into operation with the execution of this decree lead towards this goal. It is only from our point of view that heaven is that which is the last to appear; for God, on the other hand, it is continuously present in His will from the beginning of creation, as the concrete condition of the completed creation gifts.¹⁶

The earth, on the other hand, is the place of residence of the creature. It is not a different creation from heaven; it is the incomplete creation, in which the carrying out of the whole has its beginning. Initially being “desolate” and “empty,” it must undergo

¹² Ibid, p. 249.

¹³ Ibid, p. 252.

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 250.

¹⁵ H Dooyeweerd. “Het tijdsprobleem in de Wijsbegeerte der Wetsidee.” *Philosophia Reformata* 5 (1940) p. 160.

an ordering and development before it is completed and can be raised to its fullness in heaven, from which it is not to be separated for a moment.

With the creation of heaven and earth in the beginning, the image of God in heaven, as the significance and the fulfilment of the entire earthly creation, takes control of the development of this creation. In the image of God as the root-structure of the cosmos is hidden all that will come into existence in time, both according to temporal order and according to temporal duration. As this development progresses, the image of God is gradually revealed, becoming increasingly clearer and visible for us. It is completely visible only with the creation of mankind, and with that the creation is also complete for us.

This development of the creation order in the image of God is described for us in the creation story. God appears here speaking; through his Word He speaks out that which lies hidden within the whole. We come to know the fully planned order, according to which the Supreme Architect has arranged the universe. All individual creatures are bound in fixed arrangements, which belong to the full temporal reality of the concrete creature.

All creatures reveal something of the fullness of the image of God, which is impressed on the whole creation. In this image the different natural kingdoms are associated according to their radical types. The unfolding of the creation order within this root structure into a diversity of temporal ordinances is described as the work of God over a period of six “days.” This is the so-called second creation, by which the structures to which the concrete creatures are bound in their development were made visible.

These structures, and with them time, already lay potentially enclosed in the root structure of the initial creation. God created the world not *in*, but *with* time.

(Augustine) The creator had no need of “time” for His work; time is only the result of this work. “Time” in the sense of temporal duration is only necessary for the actual creatures to develop their potential according to the creation order. The “days” of

¹⁶ According also to Schilder, op. cit, p. 55f.

Genesis 1 thus had no specific duration; they had neither a longer nor shorter duration of “time.” The question of how long these days could have lasted can not be answered, not because Scripture does not reveal this to us, but because the *question*, as it is put, is completely *meaningless*.

The advocates of the realistic conception contend that with this the idea of the reality of the “days” is let go. Indeed the idea of their *temporal* reality, of a *duration* which they would have had, is abandoned. It detracts from the majesty and omnipotence of the Creator. The “days” do, however, belong to the reality of the creation, but in another and deeper sense. They were stages in the structuring of the creation plan, in each of which something *principally new* was added to the earlier. The human spirit is thus raised from the lower, the earlier, to the higher, the later, which presupposes the earlier as its basis. The six “days” are the unfolding of the one “day” of God, wherein everything already lies enclosed in the beginning. Only in their mutual connection do they lie at the foundation of the temporal becoming of the creation forms, namely, as the created planned fullness of the structure of creation. The plan of God can not be separated from temporal reality any more than the “days” can be separated from the concrete duration of time which is founded in them. And neither can the seventh “day,” the rest day of God, be separated from the rest day of mankind, which is grounded in the day of God by virtue of the divine order for creation. It is then also a fatal misunderstanding to suppose that the creation story describes the chronological sequence in which the *concrete creatures* appeared on earth in their species. It is already obvious to a schoolchild that this conception conflicts with the facts of natural science on a number of points. I repeat: with the *facts*; one need not be an evolutionist to see numerous controversies. On this point then I agree totally with Dr Verseveldt’s criticism. That Dr Aalders in particular goes to such lengths to bring to the fore the uncertainties, contradictions, and speculative constructions in science comes from an inaccurate view of the character of the “days” and of their sequence. Aalders and others agree in theory with Augustine, that Genesis 1 must not on any account be regarded as a scientifically accurate account of the natural becoming of things, but in practice they want to bind the natural scientist to their conception of the temporal sequence of the creation deeds in the six “days” as “periods of time.”

Genesis 1 is concerned with the sequence of creatures in connection with their approximation to the created image of God. Prof. Noordtzij and others have shown that the creation works are arranged according to a specific scheme and are divided over the six “days.” In the first three “days” the world space and the elements were ordered, while in the last three “days” the creation of the occupants of the newly-formed world took place. The first “day” parallels the fourth, the second the fifth, and the third the sixth. Beginning with the creatures which are furthest removed from humans, Scripture progresses to ever higher orderings and rises up to mankind as the created image of God. This exegesis does indeed make different features of the creation story understandable, which in the current conception remain unintelligible. It would be incorrect, however, to regard this exegesis as the last word about Genesis 1. But so long as nothing better is put in its place, then it is not wrong to suggest to Christian researchers in natural sciences that they give preference to the exegesis of Noordtzij (among others) rather than to that of Aalders (among others). Dr W J A Schouten has shown that the so-called “difficulties” and conflicts totally disappear with this exegesis.¹⁷

With respect to the terminology of Prof. Noordtzij and Dr Verseveldt however, I have, with Dr Popma, a reservation. They speak of “the creating idea” of which the Word is the bearer, and of an “ideal order of created facts” (Prof Noordtzij). We must adhere to the “idea” and not the letter of the story. The “ideal conception” is the only correct one (Dr Verseveldt). The advocates of the realistic conception fear that the normative meaning of the creation story for scientific thought is denied by these “ideal conceptions.” This danger is indeed not imaginary. Noordtzij does reject the ideal theory, but in his terminology he is not entirely free from it. This is a pity, for it hampers the working out of his thought, which is thoroughly Scriptural in every respect.

The “days” of which the creation story speaks must then be conceived as neither objective and real, nor ideal. They reveal to us the divine creation order; in other words, they are normative for our thinking, like all Sacred Scripture. The realistic

¹⁷ W J A Schouten. **Sterren en sterrenstelsels**, 1932, p. 171.

conception rightly wishes to maintain the normativity of the creation story also for the natural scientist. It does this, however, in an incorrect fashion, as I have already explained above. In the first place, the creation story as norm for Christian science may not be separated from what Scripture teaches further about the creation, and in the second place the “days” are not themselves temporal realities, but *are the basis for* the real temporal duration of the concrete creation. They are then also normative for the Christian thinker, in so far as he seeks in his research to be oriented by the creation ordinances, which are contained in the image of God, and are not to be separated from this.

In conclusion, a few words about this concrete creation.

Although from our viewpoint the temporal ordinances for the creation were put in the framework of six “days,” “time” in the meaning of temporal *duration* originated only when the concrete creatures appeared. The earth and the waters “brought them forth” in all sorts of types and species and they propagated themselves “according to their kinds.” They were and still are intrinsically bound to the existing ordinances, and are placed adjacent to each other in the great whole of the creation structure.

Evolutionism, which absolutizes the evolution principle, is radically cut off here.

Evolution occurs only on the foundation of the creation: it presupposes created potential within creation ordinances. These types of creatures are then also constant in the changing stream of variable individuals. How long life in its different forms has already existed on earth is a question for natural science. The hypothesis of many hundreds of millions of years finds support in many facts and in no way conflicts with Scripture. For Scripture does not pretend to have anything to do with the laws of evolution.

Each of the three persons of the Divine Being perform a specific role in the creation and development of the cosmos. If the whole of the creation is from the Father, and if the ordinances are made through the Son, then the unfolding of the countless possibilities of individual figures forming within these ordinances is the work of the Spirit. This is not to say, however, that the creation ordinances and the concrete creatures are not also from the Father and through the Son. The Spirit is only brought

into a *particular* relation to the development process; He drives the creatures from their potentials within the whole and directs them to their destination. The Spirit goes into action as soon as the Word is spoken forth, and the Word is spoken forth as soon as the whole is created. In reality then there is no *separation* but only a *distinction* between the activities of the three persons of the Godhead. It is precisely these distinctions that make it possible for human consciousness to obtain an insight into the Divine work of creation.