

Young or Old Earth?

Since the LCA held their synod a few months back, some of the ‘conservative side’ (both pastors and laymen) have been debating the issue of women’s ordination on a closed email chat group of which I am a member. They all heartily agree that the issue of women’s ordination is contrary to Scripture, but they still will not act. They say all the right things but won’t turn these words into actions.

Recently, another debate has arisen on the chat group which shows that they have more than just the women’s ordination debate to think about. There is currently ongoing debate about the age of the earth. Some are stating that we live on a young earth, while others say the earth is old, as in billions of years.

To date the age of the earth, it is vitally important that we have a proper understanding of the Hebrew word for day (*yom*) which occurs over 2,000 times in the Old Testament. Like our English word “day,” *yom* can be used to mean an ordinary 24-hour day or an indefinite period of time (such as “in the day of Abraham”). In both English and Hebrew, the intended meaning of “day” is generally obvious by the context in which it is used. For example, in over 100 instances where the phrase “evening and morning” accompany the word *yom* in the Old Testament (as it does in the days of creation in Genesis), it always refers to an ordinary 24-hour day. Also, in all the places in Scripture where the word *yom* is preceded by a number (as it is in the days of creation), it always means a 24-hour day. Despite these simple and quite obvious rules governing its use, the interpretation of the Hebrew word *yom* in the creation week of Genesis has become one of the most contested issues among professing Christians. How could this be, and is it really important?

For centuries, the six days of creation in Genesis were understood by nearly all Church Fathers and Biblical Hebrew scholars to be ordinary 24-hour days. However, due to the widespread acceptance of evolution over the last century and a half (even in the church), attempts have been made to interpret the days of creation in a way consistent with the evolutionary time scale. Even many who accept creation out of nothing through the power of God’s Word feel compelled to somehow incorporate the evolutionary time scale, if not the evolutionary process itself, into the Genesis account of creation. Thus, some creationists have attempted to stretch the seven “days” of the creation week into several billion years.

The reason “old-earth creationists” have accepted the evolutionary time scale is they believe that current estimates of the ages of the earth and universe are absolute facts, with which it would be foolish to disagree. But estimations of both the age of the earth and the universe critically depend on unprovable assumptions regarding their origin. The prevailing evolutionary assumption regarding the origin of the universe is known as the “big-bang theory.” According to this view, the universe began with an outward expansion of a small and unimaginably dense ball of matter/energy known as the “singularity.” As the material (originally mere protons and hydrogen) expanded uniformly in all directions, it somehow condensed to form the various celestial objects such as the stars and planets, though this would not be expected. The essential evidence for this theory is that all stars seem to be continually moving away from one another (the so-called “red shift”). Thus the age of the universe is calculated, in part, by determining how long it would take for the universe to expand at its current rate to its current dimensions. Unfortunately, no one knows what the actual rate of expansion or dimensions of the universe is, but estimates of the age of the universe based on “big-bang” assumptions have been in the range of 14-17 billion years.

Perhaps the most popular evidence for an old universe is the apparent time required for light to reach the earth from our more distant stars. Some stars are estimated to be several billion light years away (a light year is the distance light travels in a year). Thus it is argued that since it would take billions of years for the light from such stars to reach the earth, these stars must have been in existence and emitting light for billions of years. Creationists who find this a compelling argument for an old universe apparently assume that even a God who can create stars by the power of His Word must still wait patiently for their light to reach the earth. While young-earth creationists believe that God instantly created the stars and their long light beams (and thus only give the appearance of age), old-earth creationists counter that God would never instantly create anything with the appearance of age as this would be “deception.” The issue, however, is really one of God’s sovereignty, not deception.

The God who created light (to separate the day from the night on earth) three days before He created the sun would hardly have to wait for “poky” light beams! Not only starlight but virtually everything God created would have the appearance of age at the very moment of its creation. Consider Adam and Eve. God created Adam and then Eve and told them to populate the earth (Gen. 1:28). They were created as mature people, able to procreate. God did not create them as babies who then had to wait until they were of age before commanding them to have children. Adam and Eve had the appearance of age (actually the appearance of maturity) *at the moment of their creation*.

Old-earth creationists generally accept without question the ages given by evolutionary geologists for the various layers of the “geologic column.” The estimated ages of these sedimentary layers (which get increasingly older as you descend the column) are primarily based on the assumed evolutionary age of the fossilised organisms they contain. Thus, old-earth creationists are obliged to accept a progressive appearance of living organisms (whether by creation or evolution) spread out over hundreds of millions of years.

Young-earth creationists, on the other hand, believe that the sedimentary layers of the geological column and its fossils were deposited in a short period of time by the Flood. Thus, while young-earthers see the geologic column and its fossils as evidence of God’s catastrophic punishment for sin, old-earthers interpret these same fossils as evidence of God’s good “creative” work! It is difficult to imagine more diametrically opposing views. I will leave it to the reader to decide whether the world-wide death and

destruction we see in the fossil record is more consistent with God's work as a loving Creator or with His work as a wrathful destroyer.

The major problem with accepting the geological column and its fossils as evidence of God's "creative work" is that all fossils (including human fossils) are dead - stone-dead, in fact. This requires us to believe that suffering and death (for both man and animals) have been with us from the very beginning of creation; indeed, that God intended for us to suffer and die. But the Bible teaches that God created everything perfectly and pronounced it "good." Suffering and death are not natural, but rather came into the world through the sin of disobedience. This is the very essence and meaning of the Bible, and the purpose of Christ's redemptive work.