

AGE OF THE EARTH: BIBLICAL & SCIENTIFIC IMPLICATIONS

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ABSTRACT

Theological, historical and scientific reasons for the universal interest in the age of the earth question are explored. Underlying issues relating to creation and evolution are exposed and analyzed. Interviews with pastors, seminary professors, teachers at Christian schools as well as interviews with laymen have shown that one's position on the age of the earth can be used to predict a person's approach to creation and his interpretation of Genesis.

INTRODUCTION

The question of the age of the earth (or the entire universe) arises in nearly every discussion of creation and evolution. In fact it is one of the first questions to be asked during question and answer sessions following a Bible-science presentation. Why is this so? Also even within the Christian community one finds sharply divided views and even antagonisms over this issue. Some, whether they be scientist, theologian or layman, hold that the earth is billions of years old while others hold to a "young" earth of thousands of years age. As a consequence, there is much confusion over this issue. What are the underlying reasons for this dispute? This paper will seek to answer this question. Data presented here were obtained from numerous recent personal interviews, from various published literature and from the author's own observations and experiences over many years as a speaker on creation and evolution.

CONTEMPORARY SITUATION

The widespread confusion even among Christians over the question of the age of the earth was recently brought sharply to my attention during a recent class on creation and evolution I was teaching at a local institution. As part of the course requirements, students interviewed a variety of people to obtain their views on origins. One result greatly surprised students and even caused considerable distress to a number of them. The source of surprise and distress was the extreme antagonism and hostility expressed toward creationists by some "evangelical" Christian leaders. However, this antagonism within the Christian camp towards creationists has been documented elsewhere.⁽¹⁾ "Creationists" were identified as Christians who believed in a recent creation and young age for the earth. The interviews also revealed that people in general, Christian and non-Christian alike, are often quite bewildered and confused concerning the questions of creation and evolution. This is especially true concerning the age question. Why the confusion? Why the antagonism?

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

In order to more fully appreciate the present controversy over the age of the earth question, it is helpful to have some historical background on the matter. It gives perspective to the whole issue. Until the nineteenth century, leading scholars, both Jewish and Christian, taught that the earth had an age measured in thousands of years. This conclusion was based on careful and thorough study of Scripture.

In addition, scientific scholars such as Isaac Newton, Robert Boyle, and Michael Faraday, who were the founders of modern science, also believed in a young earth and a worldwide catastrophic Flood. These scholars assumed that God spoke clearly and plainly in Scripture not only on religious matters, but also concerning history and the cosmos. They therefore used the plain language of Scripture as the starting point for interpreting factual data from the natural world. This procedure was followed from ancient times right up until about 1800. For them, the words of Scripture were included as part of the "data".

Even those Christians who violently oppose the young earth position admit these historical facts. For example, the anti-young earther, Davis Young in discussing the age controversy states

Such sharp divergence of opinion on this question is recent, for until the end of the eighteenth century, Christians were virtually unanimous in the belief that the Earth was about six thousand years old according to the teaching of Scripture.(2)

Thus up until about 1800 or so, Scripture was the anchor point for all truth including the age of the earth.

However by 1800 a paradigm shift began to take place. By this time science starting from a Scriptural base had become quite successful. Antisupernaturalism and materialistic presuppositions began to replace scriptural presuppositions. Materialism presupposes an infinite regression of cause and effect. Creation is a supernatural explanation and is specifically excluded by materialistic presuppositions. The words of Scripture were no longer allowed to be part of the data. The materialistic paradigm also insisted on a new definition of science. "Science by definition now became a materialistic explanation. Therefore creation became by definition "unscientific". "Science" began to replace Scripture as the ultimate test for truth. This historical development has been thoroughly discussed elsewhere.(3,4,5,6)

The age of the earth question is intimately tied in with the paradigm shift as even secular authors have pointed out.(7) "The revolution began when it became obvious (sic) that the earth was very ancient rather than having been created only six thousand years ago. This finding (sic) was the snowball that started the whole avalanche."(8) The revolution referred to is the paradigm shift away from Biblical creation and the Flood to Darwinism and geological uniformitarianism. Facts discovered by science were not the reason for the shift. Rather the facts of science were beginning to be reinterpreted using materialistic presuppositions.

Those who championed the paradigm shift to materialism knew and even openly admitted that the materialistic paradigm was contrary to Scripture.(9,10) Furthermore they also propagandized that their views and conclusions were "scientific" while opposing views based on Scripture were only "religious".

By about 1900 most universities in the western world had moved over to the materialistic view of origins and had adopted the changed definition of "scientific". Evolution and the associated belief in a very old earth became respectable. It became "scientific" to believe in an old earth.

For the most part, the Christian community was slow at understanding and responding or was even unaware of what was occurring as the result of this paradigm shift.(11) As a consequence, Christians were not taught to distinguish between actual fact versus interpretation of fact. Because they were not taught this distinction, Christians were trapped into thinking that they either had to deny scientific "facts" relating to the age question and remain true to the Bible or accept scientific fact and find some way to reinterpret the Bible to agree with scientific "fact". That is still the case for the great majority of people in our day as was shown by data gained during research for this paper.

One's assumptions carry with them implications for his theology and also determine the way he interprets the Bible as well as his science. It has even been suggested that there is a direct and predictable connection between one's views on creation and earth age, and his whole apologetic system or religious views.

The differences in the interpretation of Genesis 1 go far deeper than mere differences of opinion; they stem from radically different theological and apologetic approaches. ...One can almost always predict what type of interpretation of creation a given author will embrace if he knows what type of apologetic system that author employs.(12)

That is indeed a weighty assertion. If true, it could greatly help in understanding the confusion surrounding the age issue.

INTERVIEWS

In order to determine what connection, if any, exists between the type of interpretation of creation one employs and his apologetic system, over one hundred personal interviews were conducted with a variety of people between July and November, 1989. Interviews were conducted with individuals from a wide variety of backgrounds and educational and professional levels. Approximately fifty percent of the interviews were specifically arranged and conducted with a broad spectrum of professional theologians or clergy.

Because the interviews were conducted as interviews and not as a poll, there was considerable variation in the sequence and format of questions as well as in each individual's response. However during each interview a response was sought to the following questions. These questions were chosen because this author had previously observed that they seemed to be predictive of one's approach to Scripture and in fact of a person's whole apologetic system.

1. Do you believe in creation or evolution?
2. Should Genesis be interpreted literally?
3. What is the length of the days in Genesis chapter one?
4. How old is the earth?

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A summary of interview responses is listed in Table I. Note that among theologians interviewed, only 17 percent are categorized as out and out "liberal". Also, only responses from those claiming to be Christians were used in drawing research conclusions although non-Christians were also included in the interviews.

A brief survey of the table will show that some percentages listed seem to be contradictory. One reason for the apparent contradiction is that interviewees were not always consistent. Nevertheless by combining data from Table I together with data recorded during the interviews, some definite conclusions can be drawn.

Table I - Interview Results

Questions

Creation or evolution?
Genesis literal?
Length of day?
Age of earth?

Responses

	Yes	Uncertain	No
Genesis literal	10%	30%	60%
Direct creation	40%	60%	0%
Theistic evolution	80%	13%	7%
Literal day	10%	60%	30%
Young earth	25%	20%	60%

A first conclusion is that without exception those who rejected a literal Genesis did so not from Scriptural principles but from what they considered to be established scientific fact. "Science" was cited in each case as the reason for rejecting a literal creation account. This is a major finding from this study. It also agrees with statements made by non-literalist authors who attack the direct, literal creationist view.

Why do creationists and most Christian geologists interpret the history of the Earth so very differently? I must conclude that the creationist, flood catastrophists are, for some reason, unwilling to read the totality of the available geological evidence. They are unwilling to abandon their young-Earth, global-Flood hypothesis even when the evidence, properly interpreted, shows it to be untenable.(13)

A second point clearly shown by this study is that among the 83 percent who classify themselves as theological conservatives, many take a non-literal approach to creation. However, the non-literalists still strongly insist that they be considered as "evangelical" Christians. Many even claim to hold to Scriptural inerrancy and infallibility.

I write as one who is firmly committed to the infallibility and inerrancy of Scripture and in full agreement with historic Christianity. I simply believe that the young-Earth view is unscientific and not necessarily biblical.(14)

Young seems to be inconsistent here when he states that he is in full agreement with historic Christianity, because elsewhere in his book he states that historic Christians believed in a young earth.(15) However the whole thesis of Young's book is that he believes in an old earth.

They claim to hold to inerrancy of Scripture but insist that the Genesis creation account is not literal but allegorical or mythical. This seeming contradiction causes a great deal of confusion in the Christian community.

A third point revealed in this study is the different responses to their opponents by those who are literalists versus those who are not. Non-literalists who classify themselves as evangelicals often bitterly attack the person and integrity of the literal creationists.(16,17,18) On the other hand, literal creationists tend to attack the issues instead of attacking the person.(19,20)

In summary, the dispute over the age of the earth can be traced to two different and mutually exclusive apologetic systems with far-reaching consequences. "...it influences our interpretation of Scripture, our understanding of man and our view of God."(21) An apologetic system is a way of interpreting data, including the words of Scripture. It uses the standard rules of logic to proceed to a conclusion. The two different apologetic systems arise from the way in which initial premises or starting assumptions are obtained for each. In one case man's reason is viewed as autonomous. Those who take this approach hold that man using only reason alone will be able to arrive at correct premises with which to analyze and interpret creation. For them, pronouncements or interpretations of contemporary materialistic science are therefore taken as true and Scripture must conform. When Scripture taken literally contradicts these pronouncements, Scripture must be reinterpreted in some non-literal way to harmonize with science.

In the second case, man's reason is not considered to be autonomous. Those who use this apologetic approach note that there was never a time when man was without input from God. Even before the Fall, God gave man definite input about the natural world. God's Word (revelation) provides starting assumptions for logic and reason to interpret the natural world. Genesis is taken literally in this approach and those using it are commonly referred to as creationists. According to Scripture (revelation) God alone is infinite in knowledge and therefore can provide the only absolute input for correct starting assumptions for interpreting the cosmos.

Although the sample size was relatively small, nevertheless the results of this research do indeed seem to show that by knowing a person's apologetic system, it is almost always possible to predict what approach that person will use with the Genesis creation account. Conversely, by knowing an individual's response to the question of the age of the earth, one can usually predict that person's apologetic system.

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