

Does An “Ancient” Universe Prove Christianity Is False?

Do Christians Accept the Possibility That the Universe is Ancient?



The Debate Over Age

I will confess to you now that I am an “old earth” Christian. There, I feel better. As crazy as it sounds, I sometimes feel as though I have to justify this belief in an ancient universe due to the fact that so many of my Christian brothers and sisters have drawn a line in the sand over the issue. For many in evangelical Christianity, the age of the earth has become an essential Christian doctrine. If you are a young earth believer, you are ‘in’, if you are an ancient earth believer, you are ‘out’. So let’s take a minute to talk about the age of the earth and the length of God’s creation days for those of you out there who are atheists and for those of you who are ‘young earth’ Christians. Maybe it will clear up where I stand personally, and why I believe that this controversy shouldn’t divide Christians as it has in the past.

When I first became a believer, I didn’t really give the age of the earth much thought. I didn’t think that the Bible was explicit on the issue. And history actually agrees with me on this fact, because very few early believers ever gave the issue much thought. Up through the Middle Ages, only a few Jews or Christians attempted to date God’s creation, adding up and calculating the genealogies in Genesis Chapter 5 and Chapter 10 to arrive at ages that ranged from 6,300 to 7,500 years old. These believers would simply add up all the years of the generations that are listed there and work backwards toward Adam, the first man. But in 1642, thirty one years after the King James Bible was completed, Cambridge University Vice-Chancellor John Lightfoot actually took this kind of thinking one step further. He used the genealogies and other dates mentioned in the Bible to calculate an exact date for the creation of the universe! He determined the creation point to be September 17th, 3928BC! Lightfoot had a rival named James Ussher (Anglican Archbishop of Armagh and Primate of All Ireland) who made his own calculations in 1650, and subsequently stated that the date of creation was October 3rd, 4004BC. Debate raged between the two men, and each adjusted the other’s calculations, moving the creation date slightly within a small range in 4004BC. In the years that followed, later editions of the KJV Bible actually included Ussher’s chronology and age calculations in the footnotes, and it wasn’t long before the young earth view became the norm. The vast majority of Christians through the ages have accepted this young earth thinking without ever examining the dating for themselves.



Does Natural Revelation Agree with Special Revelation?

I never saw this dating of the universe as a pre-requisite for my faith. Maybe that’s because I didn’t begin with a KJV Bible that had Ussher’s footnotes! Instead, I believed God when he told me in His Word that His special revelation is always consistent with His natural revelation:



Psalm 19:1-4

The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge. There is no speech or language where their voice is not heard. Their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world.



Romans 1:18-19

The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them.

As a Christian, I believed that it was fair for me to examine both special revelation and natural revelation in a serious manner. I also believed that there would be a harmony in everything that I would ultimately discover. So when I examined God's natural scientific evidence that clearly pointed to an ancient creation, I knew that this must harmonize with what God was telling me about that creation in His Word. One of the first observations I made about the way that Lightfoot and Ussher dated the creation was the way that they ignored genealogical 'gaps'. When we look closely at the Biblical genealogies, we see that they contain gaps; places where some generations have been omitted. In addition, when someone is said to be a "father" of someone in the scriptures, it often simply means that he is an "ancestor" of someone. In a similar way, when someone is said to be a "son" of someone, it often simply means that he is a "descendant" of someone. That's why Jesus can be called the "Son of David" when he is actually a distant descendant!

Now let's take a look at one of the Biblical genealogies, found in Matthew 1:8. Here, the scripture says that Jehoram is the father of Uzziah. If we look at 1 Chronicles 3:11-12, we can see that three generations actually separate Jehoram from Uzziah. Clearly the word "father" is used to indicate "ancestor"! There is an intentional genealogical gap. In addition to this, if we compare Genesis 10:24 to Luke 3:36, we discover that Cainan has been omitted from the Genesis genealogy. There are undoubtedly other gaps as well, as the list of names is meant to paint the genealogy broadly without concern for chronological precision. It was God's desire for us to understand the GENEALOGICAL roots of our heritage, not the precise CHRONOLOGICAL age of our planet! For this reason, I've never been compelled to determine the age of the universe from Biblical genealogies.



Not Influenced By Anything Other Than the Scripture!

Now notice that it is very possible to come to the conclusion that the Bible is silent about the age of the earth simply by examining the scripture carefully. Ancient Earth Christians are often accused of allowing SCIENCE to dictate and influence their perception of truth, but this is not true. Our observations of God's natural revelation are certainly a factor, but if there was something in God's special revelation that contradicted what we thought we were seeing, we would be the first to bow to God's Word. No Doubt. But related to the issue of the age of the earth, the Bible is simply silent, and offers nothing to contradict what we are seeing in God's natural revelation.



But What About the Length of Creation Days?

Now let's take a minute to discuss an even trickier issue. Let's talk about the length of the creation days mentioned in Genesis Chapter One. Let me start by saying that I have no problem with the idea that God is powerful enough to create the universe in however long he would like. I have no problem thinking, in fact, that God could create everything in the blink of an eye. But creation appears to tell us that the earth is very old, and develops slowly over time, with the sudden appearance of life and of species spread out over thousands (indeed, millions) of years. How are we to understand the Genesis narrative in

light of God's natural revelation? Well I'm not the first person to wonder about the length of the creation days. Believers have been speculating about this issue for 2000 years. And interestingly, these believers were not cast out from the faith for their views on the issue.

As an English speaker, I am blessed with an incredible selection of words and terms from which to carefully express my thoughts and desires. If you include the words that we use to express scientific and biological notions and objects, the English language provides us with nearly 4 million words. Ancient Hebrew, on the other hand, allows us only several thousand words. Well, you can imagine that Hebrew words are often pressed into multiple usages. And Genesis 1 does contain one such word that was used by Moses in a number of different ways as he penned the first five books of our Bible.

The Hebrew word "yowm" is used literally to express the period of time between an earthly sunrise and sunset, but it is also used figuratively to indicate any finite space of time defined by an associated term or frame of reference. This multiple definition provides us with something to think about as we read the creation account. Take a look at Genesis 1:3-5, for example:



Genesis 1:3-5

And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness. God called the light "day," and the darkness he called "night." And there was evening, and there was morning - the first day"

The word used to express the notion of day is, you guessed it, "yowm". So how does Moses intend the word to be understood? Is it a literal 24 hour day that Moses has in mind here? There are several other places in Moses' Biblical contribution where he uses the very same word to express a much longer period of time than 24 hours. Here are just a few examples (the word, "yowm" is used in each verse to express the intended idea):



Genesis 35:3

Then come, let us go up to Bethel, where I will build an altar to God, who answered me in the day of my distress and who has been with me wherever I have gone."



Genesis 10:25

Two sons were born to Eber: One was named Peleg, because in his time the earth was divided; his brother was named Joktan.



Genesis 26:1

Now there was a famine in the land — besides the earlier famine of Abraham's time — and Isaac went to Abimelech king of the Philistines in Gerar.



Genesis 40:4

And the captain of the bodyguard put Joseph in charge of them, and he took care of them; and they were in confinement for some time.



Genesis 26:8

When Isaac had been there a long time, Abimelech king of the Philistines looked down from a window and saw Isaac caressing his wife Rebekah.



The First to Question

Ancient Jewish believers questioned the length of the creation days, based largely on the way that Moses used the term, “yowm”, coupled with the fact that the creation order does not provide a sun or moon (by which one could actually calculate an earthly day until the fourth ‘day’ of creation! The first century Jewish scholar, Philo (13AD to 50 AD), believed that Moses was speaking in an allegorical sense when he penned the creation account:

"And God finished on the sixth day His works which He had made' (Genesis 2:2). It is quite foolish to think that the world was created in six days in a space of time at all. Why? Because every period of time is a series of days and nights, and these can only be made such by the movement of the sun as it goes over and under the earth; but the sun is part of heaven, so that time is confessedly more recent than the world. It would therefore be correct to say that the world was not made in time, but that time was formed by means of the world, for it was heaven's movement that was the index of the nature of time."

In addition to this, Josephus (37AD to 100AD) also wrote that the exact meaning of “one day” in Genesis 1:5 needed to be further explained as something other than a literal 24 hour period of time, but he never actually wrote or tried to explain what he believed this period of time to be.



Christians Have Also Wondered

But in addition to these ancient Jewish believers, the earliest Christians also wondered about the length of the creation days. Most of their speculation appears to be based on two passages of scripture which demonstrate that the length of God’s days differ from the length of man’s days:



2 Peter 3:8

But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day.



Psalm 90:4

For a thousand years in your sight are like a day that has just gone by, or like a watch in the night.

From the first century on, some of the greatest Christian thinkers in history have interpreted the length of the creation day to be far longer than a 24 hour period of time. Here is a brief summary of some of the most notable thinkers:



1 Justin Martyr

100AD to 165AD

"For as Adam was told that in the day he ate of the tree he would die, we know that he did not complete a thousand years [Gen. 5:5]. We have perceived, moreover, that the expression 'The day of the Lord is a thousand years' [Ps. 90:4] is connected with this subject" (Dialogue with Trypho the Jew 81 – 155AD).

2 Irenaeus
130AD to 200AD

"And there are some, again, who relegate the death of Adam to the thousandth year; for since 'a day of the Lord is a thousand years,' he did not overstep the thousand years, but died within them, thus bearing out the sentence of his sin" (Against Heresies 5:23:2 – 189AD).

3 Hippolytus (through the writings of Ambrose)
170AD to 235AD

"Scripture established a law that twenty-four hours, including both day and night, should be given the name of day only, as if one were to say the length of one day is twenty-four hours in extent. . . . The nights in this reckoning are considered to be component parts of the days that are counted. Therefore, just as there is a single revolution of time, so there is but one day. There are many who call even a week one day, because it returns to itself, just as one day does, and one might say seven times revolves back on itself" (Hexaemeron – 393AD).

4 Origen
185AD to 254AD

"For who that has understanding will suppose that the first and second and third day existed without a sun and moon and stars and that the first day was, as it were, also without a sky? . . . I do not suppose that anyone doubts that these things figuratively indicate certain mysteries, the history having taken place in appearance and not literally" (The Fundamental Doctrines 4:1:16 – 225AD).

5 Lactantius
240AD to 320AD

"Therefore let the philosophers, who enumerate thousands of ages from the beginning of the world, know that the six-thousandth year is not yet complete. . . . Therefore, since all the works of God were completed in six days, the world must continue in its present state through six ages, that is, six thousand years. For the great day of God is limited by a circle of a thousand years, as the prophet shows, who says, 'In thy sight, O Lord, a thousand years are as one day [Ps. 90:4]" (Divine Institutes 7:14 – 307AD).

6 Methodius
250?AD to 311AD

"For since in six days God made the heaven and the earth, and finished the whole world, and rested on the seventh day from all his works which he had made, and blessed the seventh day and sanctified it, so by a figure in the seventh month, when the fruits of the earth have been gathered in, we are commanded to keep the feast to the Lord, which signifies that, when this world shall be terminated at the seventh thousand years, when God shall have completed the world, he shall rejoice in us." (Discourse ix. chap. i. sect. 4).

7 Victorinus
245?AD to 303AD

"God produced the entire mass for the adornment of his majesty in six days. On the seventh day, he consecrated it with a blessing" (On the Creation of the World – 280AD).

8 Augustine
354AD to 430AD

"For in these days [of creation] the morning and evening are counted until, on the sixth day, all things which God then made were finished, and on the seventh the rest of God was mysteriously and sublimely signaled. What kind of days these were is extremely difficult or perhaps impossible for us to conceive, and how much more to say!" (The City of God 11:6 – 419AD).

9 Basil
329AD to 379AD

"And there was evening and morning, one day.' Why did he say 'one' and not 'first'? . . . He said 'one' because he was defining the measure of day and night . . . since twenty-four hours fill up the interval of one day" (The Six Days Work 1:1–2 – 370AD).

Clearly, there has been a rich tradition of Christian thinkers who have interpreted the creation days to be something other than a literal 24 hour period of time. These folks believed the six days of creation to be much more akin to six epoch periods of time. As an ancient earth Christian, I do believe that I am part of that rich tradition.



Not Influenced By Anything Other Than the Scripture!

Now notice that it is very possible to come to the conclusion that the Bible teaches that the earth and universe are ancient without having to lean at all on the physical science that dates the universe and earth in this way. None of these early Christian believers had the physical natural evidence that we have today, yet they still believed that God was speaking figuratively through Moses when describing the creation account in Genesis. These early believers were simply searching the scripture and doing their best to understand the scripture using their rational minds and comparing the words of Moses with other related passages from the Bible (like Psalm 90 and 2Peter 3). As a current day ancient earth Christian, it is entirely possible for me to come to the same conclusions in just the same manner, but I also have God's natural creation to confirm what I believe the scriptures are teaching.



There's a Reason Why the Creeds Are Silent

But there is an even bigger question at stake here. Is our understanding, as Christians, about the age of the earth and the length of the creation days an essential belief for salvation? In other words, if I believe that the universe is ancient, and that the six days of creation are actually six epoch periods of time from God's perspective rather than ours, am I risking my salvation? Well, throughout history, Christians have done their best to express what it is that the Bible teaches doctrinally about the nature of God, the nature of Jesus and the nature of our salvation. These expressions have taken the form of creeds. It is interesting to note that none of the classic, historical Christian creeds (i.e. The Apostles Creed, the Nicene Creed, the Athanasian Creed, the Heidelberg Catechism, the Belgic Confession, nor the Westminster Confession) specifically address the age of the earth or the length of the creation days as a requirement for salvation or an essential Christian Doctrine. These creeds are tolerant and silent about such issues. This is one of the reasons why I am inclined to say that our understanding of the age of the earth and length of the creation days remains something that we can discuss with great interest, but not something that should divide

US.

What Christians Agree On



But let's be very straight about what Ancient Earth Christians and Young Earth Christians DO agree about. You might be surprised to find that we agree on a great deal. You might also be surprised to find that as an Ancient Earth Christian, I still reject much of what the philosophical naturalist community continues to teach about the world around us. So for the sake of understanding, let me make a short list of some essential ancient earth Christian beliefs related specifically to the creation account:

God created all matter, all energy, all space and all time. In essence, our universe is created supernaturally by God

The universe is NOT the product of a natural process, but is instead the result of an 'extra-natural', uncaused first cause

God created the universe in an orderly fashion, within a temporal construct that is outside our complete understanding and has been expressed to us with the human words found in the Book of Genesis

While God could easily have created it all in an instant, He chose, as part of his very nature, to create in the manner described in the scriptures

God did NOT use macro-evolution as the mechanism through which he created all the biological diversity we see on our planet

Macro-evolution is a theory describing an unguided process. We, as Christians, believe that information in the DNA code actually guides the process of transformation over time, and we believe that God is the source of this information and is, therefore, guiding the process.

God prepared the universe and the planet as a home for mankind

All species of plant and animal life appear on our planet (as a product of God's Creation) in preparation for the late appearance of the human species

God created the first humans in His own 'image'

Any form of pre-Adamic hominid or primate is simply part of God's preparation of the planet in advance of the creation of Mankind. Modern humans, as we exist today, are in the image of God (in that they are conscious and spiritually aware, possess the ability to communicate this awareness, and examine their existence in relationship to the God who created them)



More to Examine

OK, when you look at it this way, I think you can see that as Christians, we do have the liberty to investigate, understand and express our beliefs on this issue without risking the alienation of those who may disagree with us. As part of the

Christian family, I am encouraged by the diversity that exists within our family. Of course this very brief overview of the issue largely ignores a number of related issues that are raised by an ancient earth view. I hope to write on these other issues as well, but in the interim, there are a number of books that do a far better job on the issue than I could ever hope to do on this website. Here are a couple of books:

A Matter of Days: Resolving a Creation Controversy

by Hugh Ross

The Genesis Debate : Three Views on the Days of Creation

by J. Ligon, III Duncann (Author), David W. Hall (Author), Hugh Ross (Author), Gleason L. Archer (Author), Lee Irons (Author), Meredith G. Kline (Author), David G. Hagopian (Editor)

A Biblical Case for an Old Earth

by David Snoke