

Scriptural Evidence for an Old Earth

Robert C. Newman
Biblical Theological Seminary

Introduction

In the area of origins the major point of dispute among evangelical Christians today is probably the age of the earth. Is our planet only a few thousand years old, as most people think the Bible teaches? Or is it some billions of years old, as most people think science teaches?

In handling the available data relevant to this problem, young-earth creationists tend to construct their models on origins from the Bible alone, and then interpret scientific data within this framework. Theistic evolutionists tend to construct their models from science alone, and then interpret the Biblical data within this framework. As an old-earth creationist, I suggest we should construct our models using both sets of data taken together. Ockham's razor should not be applied to choose the simplest model when only one of these sources has been used as the data base.

Special & General Revelation

As a Bible believer, my reason for this suggestion involves a distinction made in Scripture between two kinds of revelation, traditionally called special revelation and general revelation. Special revelation is God's disclosure to mankind of Himself, His world, His plans for mankind, etc., by means of direct (or supernatural), usually verbal, information. This information was conveyed to His prophets and subsequently written down in the Bible (see, e.g., Deut 18:14-22; Ps 19:7-11; Ps 119; 2 Tim 3:14-17).

Deut 18:14-22 (NIV) *The nations you will dispossess listen to those who practice sorcery or divination. But as for you, the LORD your God has not permitted you to do so. 15 The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own brothers. You must listen to him. 16 For this is what you asked of the LORD your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly when you said, "Let us not hear the voice of the LORD our God nor see this great fire anymore, or we will die." 17 The LORD said to me: "What they say is good. 18 I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers; I will put my words in his mouth, and he will tell them everything I command him. 19 If anyone does not listen to my words that the prophet speaks in my name, I myself will call him to account. 20 But a prophet who presumes to speak in my name anything I have not commanded him to say, or a prophet who speaks in the name of other gods, must be put to death." 21 You may say to yourselves, "How can we know when a message has not been spoken by the LORD?" 22 If what a prophet proclaims in the name of the LORD does not take place or come true, that is a message the LORD has not spoken. That prophet has spoken presumptuously. Do not be afraid of him.*

Psalms 19:7-11 (NIV) *The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul. The statutes of the LORD are trustworthy, making wise the simple. 8 The precepts of the LORD are right, giving joy*

to the heart. The commands of the LORD are radiant, giving light to the eyes. 9 The fear of the LORD is pure, enduring forever. The ordinances of the LORD are sure and altogether righteous. 10 They are more precious than gold, than much pure gold; they are sweeter than honey, than honey from the comb. 11 By them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward.

2Tim 3:14-17 (NIV) But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, 15 and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. 16 All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, 17 so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

General revelation, on the other hand, is God's disclosure to mankind of Himself, His world and the nature of mankind itself by means of indirect (i.e., providential, or nonsupernatural), non-verbal information. This information is conveyed to all mankind externally through the universe and internally through human conscience (e.g., Ps 19:1-6; Eccl; Rom 1:18-2:16).

Psalms 19:1-6 (NIV) The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. 2 Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge. 3 There is no speech or language where their voice is not heard. 4 Their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world. In the heavens he has pitched a tent for the sun, 5 which is like a bridegroom coming forth from his pavilion, like a champion rejoicing to run his course. 6 It rises at one end of the heavens and makes its circuit to the other; nothing is hidden from its heat.

Rom 1:18-20 (NIV) The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, 19 since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. 20 For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities--his eternal power and divine nature--have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.

Questions regarding origins involve information from both general and special revelation. Therefore both should be used together in constructing accurate models of what happened.

Harmonization of Revelation

How are both of these to be used in constructing such models? An example of harmonization within special revelation from Biblical interpretation may help. I count myself among those who accept the Bible as an accurate revelation from the God who cannot lie. Therefore, when I see apparently divergent accounts in the Bible of what seems to be the same incident, I proceed as follows. First of all I consider whether the accounts do indeed record the same event. If I am satisfied after investigation that the accounts do refer to the same incident, I will then interpret the accounts in such a way as to harmonize with one another, yet trying not to ignore or twist what either account says.

For instance, accounts of Jesus casting out demons into a herd of swine are recorded in Matthew 8, Mark 5 and Luke 8. In each Gospel this incident occurs after Jesus stills a storm. All record that it took place E of the Sea of Galilee; that the demon-possessed had lived in tombs; that the demons recognize Jesus as Son of God; that they seek permission to enter the swine; that the swine all drown; that the herdsmen flee to the city; and that the people beg Jesus to leave the area. It is therefore most likely that the same incident is in view.

This being so, I attempt to harmonize the apparent discrepancies regarding number of demoniacs (2 in Matthew, 1 in Mark and Luke) and the place (Gedara, Gerasa). In this case, it is suggested that there were actually two demoniacs, but that one was probably in a less serious condition than the other (perhaps fewer demons?) or took less part in the dialog. Therefore Mark and Luke, in constructing a condensed account, eliminated reference to him. The location I take to be on the E shore of the Sea, slightly N of the middle, at a geographically suitable site known today as Kursi. The term "Gerasa" is probably intended to represent this place rather than the distant Decapolis city of that name 40 mi SE. The reference to Gedara, about 10 mi away, may indicate that Kursi was in Gedara's city territories. Or perhaps this was the nearest town Mark and Luke thought their Gentile readers would be familiar with.

With regard to the creation account of Genesis one and scientific theory regarding the origin of the earth, I find a similar situation. In my book *Genesis One & The Origin of the Earth* (IVP, 1977; 2nd ed., IBRI, 2007), I point out a strong correlation that exists between the events of Genesis one and the scientific sequence for the origin of the earth, as follows:

Biblical Material

In beginning God created
 Earth without form, void
 Darkness on face of deep
 Spirit of God moves on
 face of waters
 Let there be light
 Light divided from darkness
 Light = day, darkness = night

 Waters burst forth from
 womb of earth (Job 38);
 firmament appears
 Division of waters above
 & below firmament
 Gathering of water, dry
 land appears
 Earth brings forth vegetation
 Lights appear in sky to
 mark off days, seasons;
 sun to dominate day;
 moon to dominate night

Scientific Theory

A beginning, the big bang?
 Earth amorphous, tenuous nebula
 After some contraction, cloud becomes dark within
 (Providential oversight with
 occasional intervention)
 Further contraction causes cloud to glow
 Planetary material thrust outside glowing cloud
 Planet condenses from planetesimals; sun,
 rotation give day/night sequence
 Earth is heated within by pressure, radioactivity,
 driving out water & gases to produce atmosphere
 & oceans
 Presence of atmosphere allows both surface & atm. water

 Continental material develops
 from sub-oceanic by vulcanism & erosion
 Land vegetation appears
 Photosynthesis by vegetation replaces carbon dioxide with
 oxygen, clearing atmosphere so sun, moon, stars
 visible; also prepares atmosphere for animals, man

Such a correlation leads me to believe the two accounts are talking about the same event; hence I seek to harmonize apparent discrepancies. The most serious of these would be how long ago these things occurred and how long they took to happen.

In this paper I am not considering the scientific evidence for an old earth and a long period of creative activity. Some helpful works treating this subject are: Daniel Wonderly, *God's Time Records in Ancient Sediments* (Crystal Press, 1977); Davis Young, *Christianity & the Age of the Earth* (Zondervan, 1982); and Alan Hayward, *Creation & Evolution* (SPCK, 1985).

Scriptural Evidence for an Old Earth

Does the Bible really teach that the earth is only a few thousand years old and only a few days older than mankind? This is the *prima facie* view, but it seems to overlook certain Biblical evidence that points in another direction.

First of all, there are indicators in Scripture that the period from Jesus' ascension to His second coming is very short on a time-scale that takes all of history into account. For instance, the book of Revelation speaks of His return as "soon" (Rev 1:1; 2:16; 3:11; 22:7, 12, 20). The apostles Peter (Acts 2:17), Paul (2 Tim 3:1) and Jude (18, ref to 2 Pet 3:3) consider themselves to be already in the "last days" or "last time." John even says we are in "the last hour" (1 John 2:18), though it has now been nearly two thousand years since he penned these words. If we suppose the figure involved in John's words views human history as a day, then we are carried back far beyond Ussher's 4004 BC to something like 20,000 BC. If we view his reference to the "last hour" as part of a year, we increase this period to hundreds of thousands of years. On such time scales, the second coming of Christ will indeed be soon, even if it should still be several thousand years in the future (which I doubt).

Something of the same sort appears in references to God's view of time. He sees a thousand years as a day (Ps 90:4; 2 Pet 3:8) or even as a watch in the night (Ps 90:4). Suppose we ask, "Against what background of a larger unit of time we are to view these figures?" Some will claim they are to be viewed against a week (so one traditional view, with human history lasting only seven thousand years). But the context of Ps 90 is not primarily the creation week (though creation is mentioned) but the human lifespan since the fall, never more than a thousand years, and by Moses' times reduced to 70 or 80 years. If we use this context, then we could say that God's "lifespan" since creation or the fall is seventy or eighty years of thousand-year days, i.e., 20 or 30 million years. If we use the watch in the night as the unit for a thousand years (3 per night, or 6 in 24 hours), this increases the span by a factor of six, to about 100 million years. If we take God's "lifespan" as patriarchal (a thousand such years), then the time back to creation would scale up to half a billion to several billion years, depending on whether the unit representing a thousand of our years is a day or a watch.

Something similar is obtained if we consider Ps 102:25-27, where the decay of heaven and earth

is compared to the wearing out of a garment. [Note that the Bible does not consider the heavens a permanent, changeless realm, though this idea came into medieval Christian theology via Greek thought.] The rate at which a garment wears out will vary depending on its quality and the type of use it receives, but it is not unreasonable to think of a typical garment lasting some years. Since it is God who is "wearing" and changing this garment, we use His time scales, getting hundreds of thousands to millions of years, not a few thousand.

The point here is not that we can calculate the time of creation from these figures. Rather, they warn us not to be so sure that the Bible requires a young earth. And they hint that the Bible is compatible or harmonizable with an old earth.

There are other such hints. The last plague of Revelation is a great earthquake. "No earthquake like it has ever occurred since man has been on earth, so tremendous was the quake" (Rev 16:18).

Why not "since the earth was created"? Perhaps because there were worse earthquakes earlier in geologic history, before man was created.

Scriptural Evidence for a Long Creative Period

Did the events of creation occupy only one week as we humans measure them? This is certainly the traditional view of the matter, but again there are hints that point in a different direction.

The most obvious of these hints involves the enormous activity that must have taken place on the sixth day according to the traditional scheme. This scheme assigns all activities mentioned between day n and day $n + 1$ to the latter of these two days. Thus the events of day six are described in Gen 1:24-31, between the reference to day five in Gen 1:23 and the reference to day six in 1:31.

From Genesis one we learn that both the land animals and mankind (male and female) were created on this day. Turning to the more detailed description of creation in Genesis chapter two, we see that the events of this day would involve the following: (1) God created the land animals; (2) God created man; (3) God put man in a garden which He had grown for him, with instructions to take care of it; (4) God brings before man all the birds and land animals in order for Adam to name them; (5) Adam names them all, finding no helper suitable for himself; (6) God puts Adam to sleep; (7) God makes Eve from Adam's side; (8) Adam awakes, sees Eve, and says, "At last! This is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh!"

Now many of these things were done by God and therefore might occupy Him for as much or little time as He pleased, though the use of the term "caused to grow" (Gen 2:9) suggests some longer period of time. But Adam, being neither omnipotent nor omniscient, needed considerable time to name the animals, particularly in view of the Biblical idea that names are not arbitrary, but tell something about the one named. Thus Adam would presumably not just rattle off a series of nonsense syllables, but would observe each kind of animal to choose an appropriate descriptive name. It is hardly likely that the original created kinds were so few that Adam could

study and name them in just one day.

In addition, we get the impression, both from God's own remark that it is not good for man to live alone, and from Adam's "at last!" (the literal force of the Hebrew word *happa`am* in 2:23), that Adam had had sufficient time to become lonely between his own creation and that of Eve. [For a more detailed treatment of this argument, see R. John Snow, "How Long is the Sixth Day?" an appendix in my book *Genesis One & The Origin of the Earth*.] All this indicates that the events of 1:24-31 took longer than one day, so that either the days of creation are longer than regular earthdays or the days do not follow one another consecutively. [This latter alternative is my own personal preference here.]

In addition, the Bible intimates that the seventh day either has not yet occurred or is still in progress, neither of which is consistent with the idea that the days of creation were earthdays immediately following one after the other. In Hebrews chapters three and four, we are told that at the time of David and in the first century AD (and presumably, still today) it was possible to enter into God's rest, which is identified in Heb 4:4 as the rest of Gen 2:2. So apparently the seventh day is either still going on or hasn't yet started.

Conclusion

It seems to me that the Bible provides internal hints that the creation account is not to be read simply as narrating a recent event occurring some few thousand years ago which lasted no more than a week of our time. Instead, using the same procedures of harmonization between general revelation and special revelation that evangelicals commonly use within special revelation, we obtain an old-earth view in which God intervened at various points to prepare our earth over a span of time consistent with the generally accepted findings of modern science. In fact, a stronger correlation between Genesis and science is obtained by this procedure than is the case with the interpretations of either young-earth creationism or theistic evolution.

[Since this paper was prepared some time in the 1980s, David Snoke has prepared an excellent book, *A Biblical Case for an Old Earth* (Baker, 2006), which contains a number of other cogent arguments for an old earth.]