

Astronomy, Christianity, and the Age of the Earth

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Evangelical Christian philosophers, scientists, and scholars ascertain that their faith is consistent with scientific reasoning. This forces the Christian to look at Genesis 1: “*In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth...and there was evening, and there was morning the...day*” (Genesis 1:1-31, New International Version) through the lens of scientific theory, and to decide how they will interpret this Scripture. Some look at the verses that follow as a contradiction to current scientific thought on the age of the earth. They see the Biblical creation account as seven literal days, which would make the earth roughly between 6,000 and 10,000 years of age. Others interpret the Hebrew word ‘Yom’ for day in Genesis 1 as ages, and these Christians believe that scientific evidence showing the age of the earth as 4.5 billion years old is supported by what they read in Scripture. In this paper, I will examine the dominant Evangelical philosophical schools of thought at a critical time, as astronomers are on the verge of further discovery of the origins of our universe.

In 2021, NASA will be launching the James Webb Space Telescope. One of the main goals of this mission is to help us see in ultraviolet light a picture of the origins of our universe, or The Big Bang. According to Dr. John Mather, Senior Project Scientist on the James Webb Space Telescope, the telescope will help us see when and how the first stars and galaxies began (Webb Telescope and the Big Bang). This is not the first time Evangelical Christians have been confronted with their interpretation of the Biblical timeline of creation, but it will bring it back to the foreground of thought, begging the question, can the Christian faith be reconciled with the discoveries of science?

Four models of creation are at the forefront of Christian philosophy. Biblical Philosopher Ken Ham subscribes to a Young Earth Theory of Creation (YEC), believing each day described

in Genesis 1 was a 24 hour period, and that the earth is less than 10,000 years old. He and proponents of this theory account for the geological record aging the earth at millions of years by saying the laws of physics changed at the fall of Adam, or possibly after the flood of Noah (Ross, 2017). Philosopher and Astronomer Hugh Ross advocates for an Old Earth theory, saying that each 'day' in the creation account in Genesis represents ages, or millions of years of time (Ross, 2017). Steven Meyer is a leading proponent for Intelligent Design (ID) who believes there is reason to believe the origin of the universe was created by an intelligent designer, but does not take a position on the age of the universe (Meyer, 2018). Finally, Deborah B. Haarsma adheres to an evolutionary creationistic belief. She believes the story of creation in Genesis is a literary account, perhaps a cultural response to polytheistic creation accounts from ancient Egypt and Babylon

(<https://biologos.org/common-questions/biblical-interpretation/how-long-are-the-days-of-genesis-1/>). Haarsma has this to say: *“Genesis 1, read in its original context, provides a powerful message against the polytheism and nature worship that pervaded the ancient world. It speaks of a God who cares for his creation and calls it good—and enters into a unique relationship with humankind, made in his image. The seven-day pattern is a literary device that serves these theological points.”*

Why can't Christians come to a united consensus when it comes to the creation account? Christians believe in the infallibility of the Bible. In I Timothy 3:16, it says, *'All Scripture is God-breathed'*, and in I Peter 1:20-21 it says, *'knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. 21 For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.'* Psalm

119: 160 says, *'The entirety of Your Word is truth'*. Seeing Scripture as coming from the inspiration of a God who is incapable of mistake, Christians see the Bible as a perfect document. Therein lies the wrestle. If a Christian interprets Genesis 1 literally, they see the repeated phrasing 'there was evening and there was morning' for each day of the creation account, and have no choice but to believe that creation took place in seven literal days. This is connected to a young earth theory because of the genealogies in scripture, namely in Luke 3, which traces Jesus' ancestry back to Adam, and which would date the earth at 6,000-10,000 years. Christians also believe in general revelation, or the belief that God reveals Himself through His creation, and that the scientific world will not contradict what is said in The Bible (Moody Bible Institute). What emphasis should be placed on general revelation when scientists are saying that the earth is millions and the universe billions of years old? The belief is that there will be perfect harmony between what is said in The Bible and what is found to be true through scientific discovery. Therefore, when a Christian encounters an apparent discrepancy between the two, it is time to take pause.

The James Webb Space Telescope is being created to shed light on when and how the universe made the first stars and galaxies. This coming information will rewrite textbooks and will be taught to students at every level of education. It, in no uncertain terms, will tell the tales of galaxies millions of light years away, and will likely give us more information than we can imagine about our expanding universe. These findings will have a major impact on Evangelical Christianity, namely proponents of the Young Earth Theory of Creation. A challenge I would leave with those Christians is this: if all truth is genuinely God's truth, perhaps it is time to examine the literal interpretation of Genesis 1 more carefully, and not time to take a hard stance

on it. After all, if God indeed is the author and creator of the universe, I'm pretty certain He isn't cowering in a cosmic corner somewhere afraid we might discover the astronomical truths that will be unveiled in the near future.

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