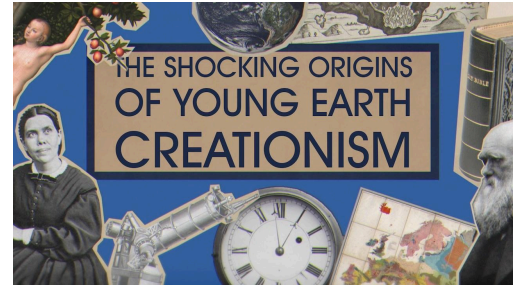




# The Origins of Young Earth Creationism

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**M**any people today think that the belief the earth is 6000 years old is an essential belief of Christianity. That the Bible teaches that the earth is young and some Christians only started reinterpreting Genesis after modern scientific advances demonstrated the earth was several billion years old. But you might be surprised to find out this is a caricature of the truth.

Several Christians in the past didn't believe the earth was necessarily young, and some that did, still interpreted Genesis figuratively or allegorically. In fact, the modern young earth movement is relatively new and has a peculiar origin many people are not aware of.

## What is Young Earth Creationism?

The National Center for Science Education (NCSE) defines young earth creationism as the idea

...which requires that the earth be no more than 10,000 years old, and that the six days of creation described in Genesis each lasted for 24 hours.

This is what we see with modern creationist organizations. Answers in Genesis states on their website that creation took place in 4004 BC. Creation Ministries International and the Institute for Creation research also have articles on their websites stating the earth is roughly 6000 years old.

I have encountered some young earth creationists who state the world is a bit older based on a literal reading of the Greek Septuagint, but most tend to fall into this definition of stating the earth is less than 10,000 years old, and most seem to state it is roughly 6000 years old.

The common belief among many non-Christians today is that this is how Christians read the Bible until modern science demonstrated the earth is 4.6 billion years old. Answers in Genesis also helps by pushing this claim. On their website Dr. James R. Mook writes,

What did the early church believe about creation? In its first 16 centuries the church held to a young earth. Earth was several thousand years old, was created quickly in six 24-hour days, and was later submerged under a worldwide flood.  
<https://answersingenesis.org/church/the-early-church-on-creation/>

Mook goes on to contradict himself, by listing Christians from past that did not hold to this interpretation. And additionally, when we dive into history, we can there are more than even he acknowledges. Many Christians long before the advent of modern geology and biology

didn't read the days of Genesis literally, and some allowed for the earth to be older than 6000 years.

## What Did Early Christians Believe?

In the second century AD, St. Irenaeus of Lyons wrote a book responding to gnostic heretics. Various gnostic sects believed the God of the old testament is a different god from Jesus and was not actually the ultimate creator of all things. Often they would argue that God was evil and lied to Adam and Eve, because the Gnostics read Genesis 2 to mean that God told Adam that if they ate from the tree of knowledge of good and evil he would die the same day that he ate, thus interpreting the word for day to mean a literal 24-hour day. However, in Genesis 3, it is clear Adam and Eve did not die on the same day they ate from the tree.

St. Irenaeus responded by stating that the days in Genesis were not literal 24-hour days, by drawing from 2 Peter 3:8, where it states the days in Genesis were periods of 1000 years (Against Heresies 5.23.2). Since Adam did not live more than a thousand years, God did not lie when he said Adam would die in the same day that he ate. However, St. Irenaeus also states he thought the days of Genesis 1 were also one thousand year periods:

For in as many days as this world was made, in so many thousand years shall it be concluded. And for this reason the Scripture says: 'Thus the heaven and the earth were finished, and all their adornment. And God brought to a conclusion upon the sixth day the works that He had made; and God rested upon the seventh day from all His works.' This is an account of the things formerly created, as also it is a prophecy of what is to come. For the day of the Lord is as a thousand years; and in six days created things were completed: it is evident, therefore, that they will come to an end at the sixth thousand year. (Against Heresies 5.28.3)

Irenaeus thought each day of creation was 1000 years, meaning on his view, the earth would be roughly 12,000 years. Technically speaking, he would not qualify as a young earth creationist, since he states the age of the earth was over 10,000 years, but only in a technical sense. However, the important point to take away from this is St. Irenaeus didn't think one had to interpret the days of Genesis 1 as literal 24-hour days, meaning the chapter was open to interpretation in the 2nd century AD and doesn't necessarily have to mean the earth is only 6000 years old.

St. Irenaeus is not alone in this understanding of the days of Genesis. St. Justin Martyr also seems to agree on this reading of days as being 1000 years (Dialogue with Trypho 81). Holding to a different

interpretation, Clement of Alexandria also did not believe creation took place in 6 24-hour days. He seemed to have believed all things were created instantaneously in the past, and the days of Genesis 1 are figurative, ordering which creations were most important to God. The longer the day, the more important whatever was listed under that day. (Stromata 6.16; St. Miscellanies 6.16)

Clement likely got this view from a contemporary of Jesus. The Jewish philosopher, Philo of Alexandria, also advocated for an instantaneous creation and that the days of Genesis 1 were figurative (The Creation of the World, 3). This interpretation of Genesis was also promoted by other early church fathers, like St. Athanasius the Great, Origen, St. Augustine, and others.

St. Augustine taught the days of Genesis 1 were not sun divided days but God divided days (The Literal Meaning of Genesis 4.27), and that all six days of Genesis 1 are called one day in Genesis 2:4, where it states,

| in the day that the LORD God made the heavens in the earth.

Thus, the days, according to his reading of Genesis 1 and 2 were not literal 24-hour days.

| It follow, therefore, that He, who created all things together, simultaneously created these six days, or seven, or rather the one day six or seven times repeated. Why, then, was there any need for six distinct days to be set forth in the narrative one after the other? The reason is that those who cannot understand the meaning of the text, 'He created all things together,' cannot arrive at the meaning of Scripture unless the narrative proceeds solely step by step. (The Literal Meaning of Genesis 5.3.6)

In other words, St. Augustine believed the days of Genesis 1 were not 6 24-hour days, but part of the narrative structure of Genesis 1. So one didn't have to take Genesis 1 to be explaining how creation literally happened.

Now, the early church fathers who believed in instantaneous creation and took Genesis 1 figuratively, still were young earth creationists, since they didn't state the earth was more than 6000 years old. But the point being they didn't have to hold to the idea the earth was 6000 years old because of a plain or literal reading of Genesis 1. There were different ways to interpret the chapter where it was read figuratively. The belief one can have a non-literal reading of Genesis wasn't a modern idea. It was present in the days of the early church fathers.

## What About Christians in the Middle Ages?

Non-literal reading of Genesis didn't disappear in the middle ages. William of Conches, for example, advocated for a non-literal reading of Genesis as well. In fact, he went so far as to argue Adam was not instantaneously created from dust. Instead, he argued the underlying truth being taught in this passage was that humans could possibly have come from natural elements working together. So on his view Genesis 2 was possibly suggesting humanity could have come about from a natural process that God implied in creation.

Robert Grosseteste followed St. Augustine in believing the six days of Genesis were metaphorical. His view was that God created light and matter which would then over time bring about the rest of creation.

This is not to say this was the dominate view in the middle ages. Historian Michael Roberts says, "In 1550 few questioned the 'biblical' age of the earth." Isaac Newton and Johannes Kepler were two who agreed with the famous Bishop Ussher that the date of creation was only around 4000 BC. However, at the time the scientific research was very limited on the investigation of the age of the earth. They held to these dates because the research of the time supported it.

Michael Roberts puts it like this,

| Since before 1760 there was little in the way of evidence for an ancient earth it is as absurd to cavil at Ussher, Calvin or Aquinas for not dating the earth at 4.6 billion years as to cavil at Darwin for not knowing about genetics.

However, even before the rise of modern geology or astronomy Roberts notes

| there was a great diversity in how theologians interpreted Genesis.

In fact,

| [Bishop Ussher's] notorious date was never official doctrine.

Reijer Hooykaas noted that John Calvin's accommodating commentary on Genesis allowed many later protestants to accept the findings of the sciences that were to come. Calvin stressed Genesis was not a book on astronomy and that Moses accommodated himself to the limitations of human understanding of the time.

Apart from this many Christians from this time period also began promoting something similar to the Gap interpretation of Genesis. When Genesis reads "the earth was without form and void," many saw this as an unspecific amount of time of chaos that was created by God, while the earth existed. Then God reworked the chaos on the earth into the creation in six days. Some suggested this period of chaos was millions of years. Some, like Thomas Burnett even added that the six days of creation were periods of one thousand years, rather than literal days. William Hobbs suggests the days of creation could have been unspecified times. This was known as the Chaos-Restitution Interpretation of Genesis and it was a dominate view of the time, even accepted by men such as Immanuel Kant, John Wesley, and John Milton. Roberts says "The chaos-restitution interpretation was adopted by most commentators in the eighteenth century."

## Christians After Modern Geology

By the time the science of geology was developing and revealing the earth was millions of years old, very few theologians actually opposed this idea. Bishop Ussher's date of creation had little influence on the church and he was mostly ignored. Most believed the discoveries of geology were completely compatible with Genesis.

In fact, Nicholas Rupke notes

| "Historical geology countered the eternalism of Enlightenment deism and, in particular, the theory of an 'eternal present' expressed in the famous maxim of the Scottish naturalist James Hutton (1726–97): 'we find no vestige of a beginning...'"

So Christians note only embraced geology, they used it to refute atheistic ideas of an eternal earth without a beginning point. In fact,

Rupke goes on to note the ironic point that some of the arguments used by Charles Lyell to promote his steady-state model of the earth, were picked up and used by young earth creationists to attack modern geology.

By 1785 Reverend James Douglas promoted the the earth was created in “six expanses of time instead of six days.” And in 1865, Revd Richard Main, wrote ‘Some school-books still teach to the ignorant that the earth is 6000 years old.... No well-educated person of the present day shares that delusion.’ At this point in history very few Christians who have left writing behind held to a young earth creationist view.

Thus Roberts concludes his work on the subject,

Christian thinkers were open to a slightly longer time-scale long before geological evidence was apparent...Despite the date of 4004 BC being in many English bibles a strict six-day creation was never the dominant view and was the official position of no church in Europe or America (until the late twentieth century).

Recent studies also point out that most early Christians responses to Darwin were not because of a literal reading of Genesis. In fact many Christians saw no conflict between a theory of evolution and Genesis. Botanist Asa Gray promoted Darwinian evolution, James McCosh and James Dwight Dana also accepted evolution.

Paleontologist Richard Owen and Zoologist St. George Jackson Mivart promoted their own form of theistic evolution. Theologian B.B. Warfield described himself as a pure darwinist as well as a Christian fundamentalist. Theistic evolutionists William Louis Poteat, John Louis Kelser, and Lulu Pace worked to promote evolution in the American South and were successful prior to the 1920s. Ronald Numbers says,

Even in the conservative South, dominated culturally by Bible-believing Baptists, a number of church-related colleges had been teaching the theory of evolution for decades. (54)

Nicholas Rupke says,

By and large, mainstream Christian geologists and paleontologists succeeded in coming to terms with the new geology and evolutionary paleontology. Their reconciliation schemes provided space for scientific inquiry as well as for religious belief. (Science and Religion A Historical Introduction, 171)

This is not to say there wasn't Christian opposition to evolution. There definitely was, and many Christians rejected Darwin's theory. In the 1920s is when we begin to see organized resistance to evolution among Christians, but prior to the 1960s these creationists did not consider themselves young-earth creationists. The historian Ronald Numbers says

...even the most literalistic Bible believers accepted the antiquity of life on Earth as revealed in the paleontological record. (Numbers, Darwin Comes to Americans, page 2)

The Scofield reference Bible, which is estimated to have sold more than 10 million copies (60), contained explanatory notes that Genesis 1 was really teaching a gap theory, where there was belied to be an unknown gap of time between verse 1 and 2 of Genesis 1, allowing for many Christians to hold to the antiquity of the earth.

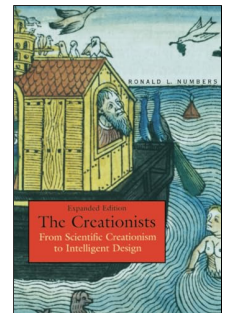
Prior to the 1960s most who described themselves as creationists held to either the gap theory of Genesis or the day-age theory. Even in the famous Scopes trial, The Creationists were not young-earth creationists. William Jennings Bryan, the prosecutor in the case, was a proponent of the day age theory. Bryan even wrote to Howard Kelly stating he had no theological objections to evolution before the appearance of humans. (The Creationists, page 58)

## Then Comes Seventh Day Adventists and Flood Geology

So what happened? Why today is the word “creationist” synonymous with “young-earth creationist”? And if young-earth believers were a minority 100 years ago, even among self proclaimed creationists, why do they appear to be a major group among Christians today and have so much influence?

In the first half of the 20th century there was only one group that was mostly comprised young earth creationists, which was the Seventh-day Adventist movement. The Seventh-day Adventists were considered heretical for claiming that Sunday worshipers would be given the mark of the beast and for elevating the visions of their prophetess, Ellen G. White, to be on par with scripture.

The Seventh-day Adventists were a very charismatic group that broke off from the Millerite movement of the 19th century. Their leader, Ellen G. White claimed she received visions from God, where she was taken back to the creation week and saw that everything was created in 6 literal 24 hour days. Then the world was destroyed in a global flood that laid down the rock layers we have now. (The Creationists, 90)



Among the Seventh-day Adventists was a man named George McReady Price, who was something of an armchair geologist. He wrote several papers and books arguing the geological column was the result of Noah's flood. So all the rock layers that demonstrated the antiquity of the Earth were really laid down during Noah's flood. He called this 'Flood Geology' and he also taught the Earth was only 6000 years old, and everything was created in six days.

Many arguments modern young earth creationist date back to Price, and not actual geological specialists. For instance, Price appears to be the first person to incorrectly claim the geological column was based on circular reasoning where the rock layers were dated by their fossil content and fossils were dated by the rock layers they were found in. He also, like modern creationists, appealed to 2 Peter 3:3-7, where it talks about scoffers coming in the last days, as being a reference to evolutionists. He utilized Exodus 20:11 to argue the creation week had to be normal 7-day week. (The Creationists, 104)

He also is the basis for other common creationist arguments famously touted by Ken Ham and others. Price said “geologists and paleontologists [looked] at their facts through the colored spectacles of Darwin and Lyell,” and creationists also look at the world through the lens of scripture. Therefore, any data used support evolution can also be used to support creation. (The Creationists, 108)

Price also promoted ideas that are not used by modern creationists, and some were quite racist, like claiming that there was a rapid degradation after the Babel incident of Genesis 11, which produced darker skin colors. This process also produced neanderthals, other hominids, and possibly even other great apes.

And to Price's credit, unlike modern creationists, he didn't claim the universe was 6000 years old, only that the earth and life on it was. This was because Ellen G. White claimed in her visions she saw that there were other planets with life that existed before earth. So the Seventh-day adventist creationists only argued for a young earth, and not a young universe. (The Creationists, 228)

Ronald Numbers notes Price's ideas were mostly rejected by fundamentalists of his day. By the 1920s Price has found few followers. Numbers says, "Before about 1970 the few disciples of Price brave enough to enter graduate programs in geology usually found evolution so pervasive they either abandoned geology or discarded flood geology." (The Creationists, 302)

But all the changed in the coming decades.

## The Genesis Flood of Whitcomb and Morris

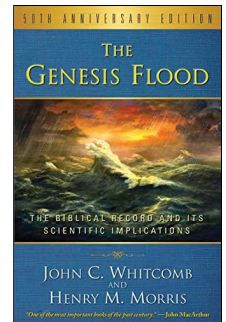
In 1954, Bernard Ramm wrote a book (The Christians View of Science and Scripture) where he exaggerated the influence of Price and criticized his flood geology and young earth stance. The point of the book was to encourage Christians to abandon views like the gap-theory and young earth creationism and hold to progressive creationist interpretations of Genesis. Unfortunately, Ramm's book had the opposite effect. The book sparked a young theologian, named John Whitcomb Jr., to write his doctoral dissertation as a response and a defense of Price's young-earth views.

After this, Whitcomb looked to get his dissertation made into a book, but publishers wouldn't take it up because Whitcomb had no scientific credentials. So he sought out a scientist who would not only endorse his views, but would also co-author a book arguing for a young earth. He first sent his manuscript to geologists, all of which rejected the invitation, pointing out the geological evidence could not be used to support a young earth. Eventually Whitcomb contacted Henry Morris, who was not a geologists, but did have a PhD. in hydraulic engineering. Morris agreed to co-author the book, but both Whitcomb and Morris were embarrassed to admit they were recycling many of Price's old argument because the scientific community had already considered Price's argument and had rejected them for decades. So they worked to distance themselves from Price, while utilizing many of his arguments for a young earth.

However, they argued the universe was also young, being that they were not followers of Ellen G. White and put forward many arguments creationists still use today, like the idea that before the flood there was a great vapor canopy that surrounded the earth and created the long lifespans listed in Genesis 5, and was responsible for altering modern radiometric carbon-14 dating.

At the time, they could not find a geologist with a PhD to review and endorse the book, but nonetheless, they went forward and in 1961, "The Genesis Flood" was published. Experts familiar with Price were quick to catch that the book was simply rehashing many of Price's old arguments. Whitcomb and Morris, instead of being dragged into a scientific debate stated,

The real issues is not the correctness of the interpretation of various details of the geological data, but simply what God has revealed in His Word concerning these matters.



Despite the scientific community rejecting their thesis, there wasn't a strong effort to pass this message onto the populace that lacked the scientific knowledge to assess it. In the first decade, the book sold around 10 thousand copies, and in 25 years it sold around 200,000 copies. Morris and Whitcomb became celebrities and were invited to travel around the world to speak at various colleges, churches, and conferences promoting their young earth and young universe ideas.

## The Origins of Young Earth Creationism

Soon after the publication of the book, the Creation Research Society was formed. They could not find a geologist to join their cause, but Clifford Burdick had some training in earth sciences and joined the committee. Morris also helped to form the Institute for Creation research which still promotes young earth creationism to this day, and in part, helped to give to Creation Ministries international and Answers in Genesis. By the 1990s "creationist" became a term synonymous with young earth creationism.

Now, we are not saying there were no young earth creationists before the Seventh-day Adventists. As we noted earlier in centuries past many believed the Earth was relatively young, but with the rise of fields like geology and paleontology the majority of Christians that left writings behind abandoned young earth ideas. Writers before the rise of modern science based their dating of the earth on the most up-to-date research of the time. The Christian reaction to the rise of modern science was at first mostly welcoming.

It wasn't until the 20th century that many driven by fear that paleontology and evolution would do away with the Bible that the modern creationist movement began. At first the anti-evolutionists were mostly old-earth creationists. But over time, as evolution became more supported by evidence and the anti-evolutionist push seemed to be gaining little ground, my suspicion is the reaction to evolution became more fanatic and so Christians began looking for alternatives to the old-earth approaches that may have seemed like compromises to many laymen.

But the modern movement did not come from an official church interpretation of Genesis that was dogmatically accepted before Darwin, and was simply eroding away in light of modern science. It stems from Seventh-day Adventist apologists who based their belief in a young earth on the visions of Ellen G. White. Long before Darwin, Christians were interpreting Genesis in a plethora of different ways. The age of the earth was not a huge issue until very recently. So despite the claim from organization like Answers in Genesis, they are

not defending something that was pivotal to Christianity and undisputed before Darwin. Christianity has always been compatible with multiple interpretations of Genesis, and the modern dogmatic

adherence to young earth creationism really traced back to the visions of an alleged prophetess.

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