

# Reflections on a Young Earth Creationist' Approach to Scientific Apologetics

JUNE 15, 2015 BY JOEL DUFF

A few weeks ago I was scheduled to present several lectures as part of a course offered by Veritas Theological Seminary in Santa Ana, California. The course title was Scientific Apologetics: The Age of the Earth. The course was split 50/50 between speakers from [Solid Rock Lectures](#) including myself, and two prominent employees of Answers in Genesis. However, just hours before I was to present I was informed by the seminary president that I would not be allowed to speak. I had spent the previous two evenings listening to 11 hours of presentations by the AiG speakers and was prepared to respond to that material in addition to pulling together the strands of thought begun by my colleagues earlier in the week.

Though I was thwarted from speaking – why this happened is a topic to explore in a future post – I spent time writing down some reflections on the course material presented by the Answers in Genesis speakers. I was able to have these reflections given to the students in addition to some of the other reading materials that I had already prepared. I have returned to my reflections originally written hastily in the very early hours of the morning. I have edited them for clarity and provided a few more examples. I am providing that edited version below as a small – 3000 word – glimpse into the world of creation apologetics.

## **Does the evidence point to a young earth? A few observations. By Joel Duff, May 30, 2015**

During the past week you have been presented with numerous evidences for and against a young earth. At one moment it may seem that the evidence points one way and another moment the evidence points in a different direction. I am sure that it must seem very confusing. So which is it? The straightforward reading of the evidence is clearly stacked in favor of an old earth. However, Terry Mortenson and Andrew Snelling from Answers and Genesis while presenting evidence have steadfastly maintained the debate isn't about the facts themselves. Rather it is about how we interpret those facts. We agree in principle that how we interpret facts is key to the conclusions we derive from them. However, the facts, or evidence, to be interpreted have to exist for any interpretation to carry any weight. It could be said we all have the same facts but are all the facts being brought to bear or are only facts that fit a particular interpretation being presented to the audience?

With respect to the evidence and its interpretation that has been presented by the Answers in Genesis team I would like to make the following observations:

## Casting Doubt is the First Line of Defense

First, in most cases the physical evidence presented by Andrew Snelling doesn't so much as point to a young earth as it attempts to show that the Earth *may* not be ancient. This is not the same as building a positive case for a young earth. Ironically, Andrew effectively demonstrated that the majority of dating methods suggest that the Earth is quite old. In many cases the dates may be older or younger than expected by conventional geologists but nonetheless much older than 6000 years. What he has attempted to do is show that radiometric dating isn't reliable for producing specific dates. We believe that radiometric dating can and does yield specific dates in the majority of situations and we have demonstrated that it is possible to test the criteria – or assumptions – of these methods even while recognizing their limitations. But the point here is that no non-Christian, upon examining the hundreds of thousands of radiometric dates produced, is going to come to the conclusion that the rocks can't be more than 4250 years old. Radiometric dating is not a positive evidence for a young earth. Andrew himself could not show any reasonable way for the radiometric dating to be positive evidence for a young earth without resorting to ad hoc hypotheses about changes in rates during the Flood to help force the dates into some conformity with a young Earth. In effect, the strategy of young earth practitioners is to cast doubt on the validity of old earth evidence, but in most cases this does not necessitate that doubt in an absolute age of the Earth should be equated as support for a young Earth. So where is the evidence FOR a young Earth? A number of evidences for a global flood were presented. In most of these cases those evidences again consisted of possible fulfilled predictions of flood geology theory. However, in addition to some of those being based on serious misconceptions about the geological record and geological processes, we would submit that at best these evidences suggest only the *possibility* of a global flood but do not *require* a global flood. For example, widespread horizontal sand deposits could be interpreted as resulting from a global flood but the fact that similar sediments are formed today on continental shelves under non-global flood conditions tells us that such deposits are not smoking gun evidence that a global flood had to have occurred. Likewise, large collections of fossil bones could have occurred in a global flood but there are equally likely explanations that don't require a global flood for their origins.

The goal of the young earth approach in their use of evidences is to promote a possible alternative reading of the evidence that may make a young earth feasible. But their case is much like the defense attorneys case in the trial of Aaron Hernandez. The defense was left to draw attention to a few minor pieces of evidence that suggested the possibility that Hernandez may not have been directly involved. They tried to cast doubt on the other facts that clearly didn't point to his innocence. In the end, the weight of the combined evidence produced a strong cohesive case that left no reasonable doubt in the juror's minds that he did participate in the murder of Odin Lloyd. To grab a line from another famous trial, the creationist approach is to focus all the attention on one or

two points and in Popperian fashion claim that “if the glove doesn’t fit, you must acquit.” Just create doubt and this creates a chance that maybe their theory is possible alternative.

### **Presuppositional Apologetics Drive Creationism**

This brings me to my second observation. We have witnessed from Terry Mortenson and Andrew Snelling a very clear presuppositional apologetic. They have both made it clear that the starting point for “interpreting” the facts is first knowing the result you are looking for. In my analogy above it is as if they have inside knowledge that Hernandez was absolutely innocent. While the data point strongly against him they can in good conscience argue on even the slimmest of evidence that he must be found innocent.

For young earth creationists, the interpretation of Scripture leads them to conclude that the Earth must be young. This foundational interpretation of biblical evidence is combined with the additional inference that all death, fuzzily defined, must post-date Adam. With those assumptions providing the absolute truth they must stand upon, the only place that they can find to *put* all that evidence of the death of critters is in a Global Flood. The Bible says nothing about the origin of rock layers directly nor does it require that a global flood even have significantly altered the entire Earth’s surface. But the flood geology of young earth creationists is asserted to be a necessary belief if one wants to claim to take the Bible literally.

With this set of presuppositions in hand including that the fossils must be the result of a recent global flood they then turn to the physical evidence. Because God’s creation must be consistent with his Word, a view with which we heartily agree, young earth creationists can boldly claim that all the evidence *must* point to a young Earth since it is in fact young. Please recognize that when the young earth creationists approaches the data to interpret these data they already know, as Terry Mortenson emphatically stated, the answer because they have the infallible Word of God backing them up. As Ken Ham very clearly stated in the debate with Bill Nye when asked if there was any evidence that could be produced that would make him rethink the age of the Earth he said NO. Ham was being very honest, there is NO evidence that could possibly point him to anything but what he already knows which is the Earth is young. Hence, no data can suggest otherwise! I think there is a huge assumption here about infallible assumptions but let’s leave that aside for today.

Young earth creationists claim to “do science” and “love science” but as Andrew Snelling “tests” his ideas about radionuclides in asteroids what if the results don’t come out as he expects. Will he admit that the evidence supports an old Earth? No, and I don’t expect him to, he will by necessity reinterpret the data to fit a young earth and look for any other explanation that fits his presuppositions no matter how far-fetched it may seem. So all creationists can claim that there is no, and will never be, any evidence that supports an old earth. There are times they may admit the

data appear to support an old earth but they believe this is only because the data have not been looked at with the right worldview glasses.

Please don't miss the importance of this point. The evidence is interpreted with the worldview glasses of a young earth on and therefore the evidence is **fit** into that worldview. In many ways we have witnessed this form of interpretation happening right here in this class and have witnessed how difficult it can be for the young earth creationists to conjure up an explanation that sounds at all rational. The radiometric dating is exceptionally difficult to fit and so we are left with "Well I wish I knew" or "God could have created various starting conditions" or "we were not there" as exasperated responses. We are provided with attempts to cast doubt and suspicion about radiometric dating but no plausible explanation for why most dating methods provide consistent results. In addition, floating forests, hydrological sorting, animals running around during the Flood laying eggs and then getting washed away are all attempts to explain the accepted "facts" of the fossil record within a young earth presupposition. In some cases the explanations are only barely plausible though in many cases we believe they are not even that. But in most cases their explanation, while possible, are clearly not explanations that are most obvious or likely. In the young earth mind they simply **must** be the explanation even if they are not likely.

To reiterate, at the end of the day, the young earth approach is more about creating doubt about the Old Earth view than it is producing a strong positive view of a young earth. But let's move on to a more critical aspect of this discussion.

### **Circular Use of Evidence to Support an Evidentialist Approach of Doing Apologetics**

The third observation I have builds on the second. All of the discussion of worldview and having the "right" beginning point to interpreting the data is a tacit admission that the data on the surface don't immediately point to a young earth. **YOU HAVE TO BELIEVE IN A YOUNG EARTH BEFORE THE EVIDENCE WILL POINT YOU IN THAT DIRECTION.** Philosophically I don't have a huge problem with this. After all I identify as more of a Vantillian presuppositionalist myself when it comes to apologetics. But here is what I find disturbing about the approach of Answers in Genesis to the age question. Andrew Snelling and Terry Mortenson have taken a clear presuppositional view to filtering the data of general revelation. But Ken Ham's enterprise is built on an evidentialist apologetic approach to promoting the gospel message. What is the stated purpose of the Creation Museum and future Ark? To witness to the world that the claims of the Bible are true by showing the world that a global flood and a young earth are "feasible" or "possible." The evidence of a young earth is presented to convince the unbeliever that the Bible may be right after all, in all its teachings. It is hoped that once the unbeliever is struck by the truth that the Bible speaks on the topic of the age of the earth they will then come to see the truth of the salvific message of the Bible.

Do you see what is happening though? The unbeliever is told they don't have the right glasses to interpret the data but the Creation Museum is claiming the evidence from the world shows the Earth is young. But as we have seen the evidence **only** points to a young earth **if** you already **know** that the Earth is young. These are mixed messages. Ken Ham gives talks and states that there are "hundreds of evidences" that point to a young earth. Actually most of those evidences do not point to a 6000 year old earth but at best only suggest the possibility that the Earth that is not billions of years old **even** when you have your young earth glasses on.

I find it troubling that Christians are being told, or at least strongly given the impression, that all the evidence points to a young earth and that this is something they can lean upon to strengthen their faith or even find faith. In fact, if AiG is correct in their original presupposition that the earth is young I will grant that all the evidence really should point to a young earth because it must. But, as an apologetic for why one should believe the Bible you can't use data that have been massaged to fit the Bible message to prove the Bible is correct. This is a circular apologetic that AiG in particular is especially prone to follow. Again, I would stress that I am not adverse to the use of presuppositional apologetics but it should not be used inappropriately.

### **So Does the Evidence Really Point to a Young Earth?**

So again, we ask; does the evidence point to a young earth? I think that it does so **ONLY** if you first assume the Earth is young and even then it only points that way very very dimly, and only if you cherry pick your starting data. But as Christians, should we not expect more? Shouldn't we expect that if the Earth were young that it would be obvious? Shouldn't it be obvious even to the unbeliever even if they may want to believe the world is vastly older? Why have most people, including a large majority of Christians involved with the collection of the data being discussed, over the past several hundred years concluded that the Earth is more than 6000 years old? Because they are atheist? Because they hate God and want to deny Him as creator? No, because the most obvious interpretation of the vast majority of the evidence is that it points to an ancient earth. Many, and here I disagree with Terry Mortenson's assessment of the history of deep time discovery, devout Christians over the past 300 years have struggled with the data that was in front of their eyes. They have worked with worldview glasses on that should have led them to believe the Earth is young but they have not been able to deny the evidence that so clearly pointed in a different direction. They discovered the evidence and they were not being bullied by others to change their minds. They lived in environments that promoted a young earth and thus had nothing to gain by expressing doubt but doubt they did because of how obvious the evidence was that the Earth was indeed ancient.

The simplest explanation for layers of rock or vast distances of light, or millions of craters on the moon and Mars is that these must have taken a long time to have formed. No one is going to look at these things and immediately jump to the conclusion that they are young. Now, after they conclude

they are very old they may find that this belief fits their secular worldview but their secular worldview isn't necessarily such an overriding force that the obvious nature of thing doesn't show forth itself. Creation should speak of God and does point to God and the fact that creation is most simply interpreted as being ancient should mean something. Common grace allows the non-Christian to discover many truths of God's creation. The average person with little background in science can see volcanoes and extrapolate in their minds how long it must have taken for them to form and thus come to the simple solution that they are old. Now, it could be true that the past was different from today but observations and testing of that hypothesis has shown that this is not likely and would not help to explain the observed evidence around us anyway. We should not be surprised that the world doesn't look out and see evidence of a young Earth.

Our concern for seminary students and those that will stand and speak for God is that they must be bold where they should be bold but cautious where they need to be cautious. They may believe, as Terry Mortenson does, that the Earth MUST be young and therefore this data MUST be constrained to fit that worldview. But we must be careful to realize that the average person is going to be exposed to thousands of evidences in their lifetime that on the face of it or by simple common sense will lead them to conclude that the Earth may be older than 6000 years. By simply asserting that the "all the evidence points to a young Earth" and therefore you must believe, the new believer or non-Christian is placed in the position of seeing a disconnect between God's general revelation and this command to believe. Ironically, young earth creationists portray their view as the simple interpretation of Scripture but then turn around and deny the simple message of general revelation requiring instead a highly contorted set of assumptions and complicated theories to understand how the Earth could be young.

We need not make light of the obvious characteristics of the world which speak of great age as if we can just wave the magic wand of putting on the right Biblical glasses it will all be made clear. The fact is that it isn't at all made clear. Hundreds of years of history makes it very "clear" that the evidence for a young earth is far from obvious even when you start with the belief that the evidence MUST support a young earth. Why have so many great Christians "fallen away" from this truth as Terry Mortenson pointed out? Maybe it wasn't that this was their one area of great weakness but rather it was because over and over again a close inspection of the physical and biblical evidence by Christians has revealed that neither absolutely demands that the Earth be young and thus the age of the Earth is left to exploration and testing.