

The Old Hickory Bulletin

Old Hickory Church of Christ

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Billions of years?

An argument for a mature creation

In the Beginning

Day Six. Sunset. Adam and Eve are exploring their new environment. What do they see all around them? Signs of age, if only they understood them.

Soon they will have children. They will discover that people do not start out grownup size. They begin very small and then grow over the course of years to be able to look their parents in the eye. But Adam and Eve did not experience this growing stage. They are adults from the beginning, with the appearance of age.

They also see trees, many bearing edible fruit. Many years later they will come to understand that the seeds inside those fruits were the genesis of life for a new generation of trees.

One day they wade into the river in the garden. How did this river get here? People will eventually discover that the waters erode the soil and cut a canal into the ground, even wearing away rocks in a process that requires many years.

But the biggest clue of all is in the night sky. After the sun sets on their first day, Adam and Eve witness an incredible transformation for the first time. The warm beautiful sun sinks into the horizon, and before long the sky comes to life with a dazzling blanket of lights.

One day people will understand that these lights are stars, much like the Sun, but very far away. The closest stellar neighbor will be named Proxima Centauri^[1]. It is more than 25 trillion miles away. This means that the light that Adam and Eve see from it began its journey toward Earth 4.2 years beforehand. Or did it?

One of the farthest heavenly objects visible to their naked eye is the Andromeda Galaxy^[2]. Based on multiple scientific methods that will be developed thousands of years in the future, man will estimate that this galaxy, a blurry disk in the sky about the size of the moon, is 2.5 million light-years away. And yet, there it is, visible in the night sky just two days after its creation. How is this possible?

Today

Fast-forward thousands of years, to the year 1996 AD. The Hubble space telescope sets its sights on a patch of night sky that would appear to us as large as a dime 75 feet away.^[3] The composite image it captures over the course of ten consecutive days reveals galaxies near the “horizon of the universe,” some of which are estimated to be more than ten billion light years away.

From Day Seven to today, whether we dig deep into the Earth’s crust or peer out into the night sky, we find evidence of a vast, incomprehensible passage of time. How does this fit with the Bible’s account of creation? Knowing what we know as we begin

[1] http://www.nasa.gov/worldbook/star_worldbook.html

[2] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Andromeda_Galaxy

[3] <http://hubblesite.org/newscenter/archive/releases/1996/01/text/>

the third millennium, is it time to finally jettison the Genesis account into space as a primitive creation myth, or possibly just a poetic song? Can there be any harmony between the Bible and modern science?

Starlight problem

Consider again what Adam and Eve saw in the sky on the evening of Day Six after the sun set. According to modern science, if God did speak the Sun, Moon, and stars into existence on Day Four, only the moon would have been visible at night for over four years, as the light from the nearest stars would not have made it to Earth yet. After five years, there would be three stars in the night sky.^[4] After ten years, eleven stars. And so on.

This scenario seems highly unlikely, as Genesis explains that the stars were created so that there would be “lights in the expanse of the heavens.” Clearly these were meant to be seen.

If God wanted to create stars that are very far away and have them be visible immediately from Earth, surely this is not beyond His ability. Which is more difficult: speaking the universe into existence, or solving the time/distance problem of starlight? Since both tasks are beyond our ability to comprehend, we may as well simply state that “if God says He did it, that’s good enough for me.”

Mature creation

However, if we can imagine a solution to the starlight problem, it could possibly shed light on other evidences of great age. To that end, consider the possibility of a mature creation. God created fully grown Adam and Eve, fruit-bearing trees, and a flowing river. Is there any reason not to assume that the entire universe was created in a mature state, including the progress of light across the heavens?

^[4] <http://www.astro.wisc.edu/~dolan/constellations/extra/nearest.html>

But light from a star or galaxy is not simply a beam of energy, it is also an image. It is an image of that celestial body in the state it was when the light began its journey to Earth. The images we see are not simply static balls of light. We find a universe in motion. Stars are being “born”, exploding, colliding^[5], and dying. Even galaxies, collections of millions and billions of stars, have been observed in apparent collision^[6]. Staring out into the sky at night is like watching an enormous movie in super-super slow motion.

But these events we are witnessing in many cases (certainly any observations from beyond our galaxy) would have occurred before creation. One might say that we are observing historical events that never happened. So what does this say about the universe God created?

If indeed the universe was created in a mature state, just as Adam and Eve were, complete with light from distant objects already reaching Earth, then what we can observe in the sky tells us that this mature creation also came with a complete realistic history. Just as the trees in Eden would have had rings telling of previous seasons that never occurred, the light from distant galaxies tells of explosions and collisions that never occurred. Layers in the crust bear witness to eons that never were.

Some object that this would be tantamount to deception on God’s part. But can we say to God that He is not allowed to create fully grown trees because that might confuse an observer into thinking they are older than they are? Or God is not allowed to create stars and have their light immediately visible on Earth because that would lead us astray in our attempts to determine the origin and age of the universe? Who are we to dictate to the Creator the rules He should follow?

The fact is, God revealed to us how He created the universe in Genesis. There is no deception because the truth has been told. Our observations are not the final arbiter of truth. The Jews perceived that Jesus was not yet 50 years old^[7]. How wrong they were!

[5] http://www.space.com/scienceastronomy/051005_short_bursts.html

[6] <http://csep10.phys.utk.edu/astr162/lect/galaxies/colliding.html>

[7] John 8:58

Implications

The mature creation concept solves many disputes. If a scientist uses radiocarbon dating and determines that a rock is half a million years old, we do not have to object that their methodology is inaccurate. Maybe it is, or maybe it isn't. It should come as no surprise that science will determine things to be very old, just like the light from distant stars. This neither confirms nor detracts from the Bible account if indeed the universe was created in a mature, aged state.

Does this mean we should throw science overboard? Absolutely not. There is no reason not to look out at the stars and try to discern their distance from earth, how they formed, and why they behave the way they do. God made all these things for us to explore and figure out.

As an example, consider the theory of plate tectonics. Based on this theory, the continents are the visible part of large plates that are moving on an underlying layer named the asthenosphere^[8]. Some plates are moving apart and others are crashing together. This understanding appears to account for observable phenomena such as earthquakes, volcanoes, and the formation of mountains.

The movement of plates currently takes place very slowly. Naturally, science attempts to work backward to explain the terrain we see around us. But we know that God caused the dry ground and oceans to form on Day Three. Apparently He did so in such a way as to have the appearance of great age. Does this invalidate the science of plate tectonics? No, because it is still useful for understanding the way the Earth behaves today.

The most important implication of the mature creation view is that it dismisses the entire debate about the "age" of the Earth as being unknowable and unprofitable. If God made the Earth already aged, how old would one expect it to be when subjected to scientific analysis? Simply put, it is irrelevant.

^[8] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Plate_tectonics

When children come home from school with questions about millions of years, we can explain that this is simply the scientists' best guess, based on their observations. And we can reiterate that the Bible clearly teaches us that God created the world in six days. We cannot prove that by science, rather we accept it on faith. "By faith we understand that the universe was created by the word of God." (Hebrews 11:3). If we accept this by faith, and we can observe that clearly things were created in a mature state, then we are neither surprised nor bothered when scientific observations point toward millions or billions of years.

Some argue that there is scientific support for a young Earth as well. Perhaps there is. But surely even the proponents of these theories would not suggest that when the Earth was created it appeared to have no age. Could the moon have been smooth and free of craters? How can one explain a river flowing through the Garden without the appearance of age? There could be no small rocks in the soil, or even soil itself, for these point toward geologic processes that require long periods of time. But most of all, if one expects science to support a young Earth, how can he explain the appearance of light from distant stars?

A mature creation view answers these difficult questions rather easily.

- Eric Reynolds

- 1 http://www.nasa.gov/worldbook/star_worldbook.html
- 2 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Andromeda_Galaxy
- 3 <http://hubblesite.org/newscenter/archive/releases/1996/01/text/>
- 4 <http://www.astro.wisc.edu/~dolan/constellations/extra/nearest.html>
- 5 http://www.space.com/scienceastronomy/051005_short_bursts.html
- 6 <http://csep10.phys.utk.edu/astr162/lect/galaxies/colliding.html>
- 7 John 8:58
- 8 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Plate_tectonics

SUNDAY'S LESSONS: Sunday morning: *"What Can We Do For America?"* (text: Luke 7:1-5); Sunday evening: Jesus Christ: A Closer Look – *Denial!* (Mark 14:66-72).