

Creationism*

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1 What is creationism?

Creationism, or more precisely Young Earth Creationism, is a theory that the earth was created roughly 6,000 years ago, as calculated by Bishop James Ussher (1658). It is not a new idea; Philip Henry Gosse (1857), a geologist, had published a similar theory before the publication of Darwin's theory of evolution.

However, science has moved on since Gosse's day when the prevailing theory was that the universe was timeless and that God had created the earth out of the existing material of the universe. Now scientists generally accept the 'big bang' theory put forward by Georges Lemaître (1927) which suggests that the universe came into being around fourteen thousand million years ago.

Christians differ from secular scientists in assuming that God created the universe as we now know it and Christians who differ from Young Earth Creationists in accepting a longer lifetime for the universe than Youth Earth Creationists do do not differ on the issue of who created the universe.

2 Intelligent design

Intelligent design is often linked with creationism but is a quite separate issue. It is clear that the universe is very finely tuned (Rees, 2000), that the sun is considerably hotter than when the earth was first formed, that living creatures have cooperated to maintain the temperature of the earth within fairly narrow bounds (Lovelock, 1979), that cooperation has been a key factor in the way organisms have evolved (Margulis and Sagan, 1995) and that there is a 'deep simplicity' in the ways in which the earth's systems interact (Gribbin, 2004).

Some, but not all, these factors are highly improbable; normally, scientists agree that, when something is highly improbable, when it is unlikely to have happened by chance, it must have been caused by something. For example, when there is a DNA match between a person and something found at the scene a crime, then, unless the person is an identical twin, it is highly unlikely that the DNA match is a result of chance.

So, taking into account all we know about the universe, it is highly unlikely that it came to be what it is solely by chance; it is not impossible, just highly unlikely. Generally, where scientists

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are faced with such a choice, they adopt Occam's razor,¹ the principle that, when faced with competing hypotheses, you should select the one which relies on the fewest assumptions.

In order to get round the need to acknowledge the existence of a creator, secular scientists have created the multiverse, or a multiplicity of universes out of which our universe is one example, in violation of Occam's razor.

Most Christians assume that the universe is as it is because that is how God (intelligently) designed it to be — including allowing human beings to mess about with it in destructive ways.

3 Radio carbon dating

Radio carbon dating was invented by Willard Libby in 1949; it relies on the fact that an unstable isotope of carbon, carbon-14, which can be found in organic matter, has a half life of 5,730 years. It is created by the interactions of cosmic rays with nitrogen and thus appears more frequently at higher altitudes. Because levels of carbon-14 are different at different places on the earth's surface, it became necessary to produce calibration curves to correct for these differences using more reliable data such as tree ring growth.

By 2004 it was estimated that, in localities for which there were good records, dating errors were around sixteen years either way up to around 4,000 BC and around 160 years either way up to around 22,000 BC.

Even if there are further improvements in the calibration curves available, carbon-14 dating is unlikely to be practical beyond around 60,000 BC because of the extent to which the carbon-14 will have decayed.

Though radio carbon dating has become a target for some Young Earth Creationists because it suggests that organic matter may pre-date the supposed creation of the earth in 4,004 BC, this argument is really irrelevant because it cannot be relied on on its own and most carbon-14 dating is carried out alongside other forms of analysis.

4 The issues

Therefore, the issues that divide most Christians from Young Earth Creationists do not include whether the universe is a result of a conscious design on the part of God. The key issue is whether God designed the universe to turn out in the way it has or whether He created it as an almost finished object that looked as if it had had a much longer life.

Underlying this issue are a number of issues and this paper can only touch on a few of them.

4.1 The historical nature of the Old Testament

It is now accepted that much of the Old Testament contains records of a historical nature, albeit written from a viewpoint of God's relationship with his chosen people, their frequent failures to live up to His expectations and His various dealings with them in those circumstances.

However, the Old Testament has a number of limitations as a historical record:

- the early parts of it were handed down in oral form over many centuries and only written down after 800 BC

¹'entities should not be multiplied more than necessary.' William of Ockham (c.1285–1349) did not invent the principle which had been stated before in various ways by others, including Maimonides, Ptolemy and Aristotle.

- any parts that were written down before then, such as the Ten Commandments, might have been written in Egyptian hieroglyphics which Moses would almost certainly have been able to read or proto-Canaanite which was known in northern Egypt but would then have had to be translated into Hebrew
- it contains more than one version of several events, notably the creation itself and the sale of Joseph into slavery
- apart from a few extracts found among the Dead Sea scrolls, the earliest Hebrew version of it that we have is from around 600 years ago and this differs from the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament made around 200 years before the birth of Christ, and both differ from the versions found among the Dead Sea Scrolls — suggesting that there was no agreement on the sacred text at least 200 years before the birth of Christ
- the Greek translation of the Old Testament gives the year of the departure of Cain to the land of Nod (Gn 4:16) as 5245 BC, considerably earlier than the date of the creation calculated by Bishop Ussher
- at the fall of the Temple in 70 AD, the Jewish historian, Josephus, was allowed to keep all the Temple scrolls and, using these, he wrote *The Antiquities of the Jews* in which he says that there were 3,833 years from creation to the death of Isaac — in other words, creation took place around 5600 BC.

This does not mean that the Old Testament cannot be used as a historical record but that its value as a historical record is constrained. Nor does it mean that the Old Testament was not inspired by God, simply that the words God inspired have not come down to us intact for a variety of reasons including memory lapses among those who transmitted the oral versions and copying errors/editing changes when new copies were made.

4.2 The nature of the universe

The universe consists of millions of interacting systems and subsystems which give the impression that they have been interacting over millions of years and evidence of these interactions can be found in the earth's surface and in observations of other objects in space.

Gosse (1857) proposed that, when God created the universe, He knew that the systems He put in place would have to interact in certain ways in order to do their job and He made it look as if those systems had been interacting in this way for many millions of years longer than they had.

The theological question posed by Young Earth Creationism is: why would God want to give a different impression about the age of the universe from its real age?

4.3 Does it matter?

The events that are central to the Christian faith happened around 2,000 years ago and there is no credible dispute about the historical Jesus — only about whether He was the Son of God and whether He rose from the dead after His crucifixion. Whether God created the earth around 4,000, 5,000 or more years before Jesus was born matters very little compared with the reason why Jesus died for us.

5 Conclusion

Clearly the issue matters to Young Earth Creationists and there are theological questions where it may be better to accept that God’s wisdom is beyond human understanding. The important point is that it should never become a stumbling block to faith; as Paul says, ‘The person who eats meat should not treat the one who does not as a nobody and the one who does not should not push aside² the one who does for God has accepted them’ (Rom 14:3).

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²This alternative translation of the Greek word $\chi\rho\nu\epsilon\tau\omega$ makes better sense of the rest of the sentence.