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REVIEW ARTICLE

Christianity and the Age of the Earth

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Christianity and the Age of the Earth, by Davis A. Young. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982. Pp. 188. \$7.95.

There is a profusion of recent books and articles dealing with the creation-evolution issue. Many of them mount a vigorous attack against the literal biblical creation view. This is an expected reaction from non-Christians, since the creation movement has seriously challenged humanistic philosophy and science. There is yet another group of critics of literal creation, this time *within* the Christian camp. These dissenters seek to modify the creationist position as it is understood today. Among the leaders of this group is Dr. Davis A. Young. His first book *Creation and the Flood* appeared in 1977, and is largely an attempt to discredit "flood geology" as presented by Whitcomb and Morris in 1961, in *The Genesis Flood*. Young's efforts have continued with the publication of articles in *Eternity* and *Christianity Today*.

Davis Young is a geologist trained at Princeton, Pennsylvania State, and Brown Universities. For the past two years he has served on the faculty of Calvin College as associate professor of Geology. He is also an elder in the Reformed Presbyterian Church, Evangelical Synod. Davis Young enjoys the distinctive privilege of having had as his father Edward J. Young, who taught OT at Westminster Theological Seminary from 1936 until his death in 1968. He wrote many books during his lifetime, including several studies on Genesis. As his father before him, Davis Young emphasizes that he believes in the infallible, inerrant word of God. He declares that the Bible is true in matters of science and history, just as in matters of theology (p. 163).

Young's purpose in writing *Christianity and the Age of the Earth* is similar to that of his first book. He seeks to establish conclusively the antiquity of the earth (p. 150). He attempts to expose the young-earth view of creation as "unscientific and not necessarily biblical" (p. 10). Even stronger, he accuses those with a literal-day creation view ("creationists") of being untruthful with scientific data (p. 162) and harmful to evangelism (p. 163). On this basis, Young opposes the efforts of creationists to promote their view of earth history. He admits that a literal 24-hour creation day is one possible interpretation that is faithful to the text (p. 161). However, he rules it out on the basis

of geologic history. Instead, Young promotes the day-age view of Genesis 1 (p. 63) in a form sometimes called "progressive creation." The six creation days are taken as long time periods which may have overlapped each other by various amounts. The seventh day, on which the Lord rested, still continues incompleting through this age. Miracles are considered to have had little if any bearing on geologic history (p. 143). Young is unsure about the magnitude of the Genesis flood, concluding that it could well have been a "very large local inundation" (p. 14). He believes that no significant physical remains of the flood have yet been discovered.

Young's view of organic evolution is one of limited acceptance, as explained in an October 8, 1982, *Christianity Today* article. He sees no problem with the evolutionary change of nonhuman plants and animals, once the first stages were created. With man, Young feels that the theory of evolution has gone too far and he favors direct creation by God. However, the door remains open to an evolutionary view of man which could somehow be made to fit the biblical record. The many ancient "ape-man" finds remain an unsolved problem for him.

Christianity and the Age of the Earth is divided into three major sections. First, there is a summary of historical views regarding the age of the earth. Second, selected scientific data is reviewed regarding age determinations. Finally, philosophical and apologetic conclusions are drawn from science and scripture. Each of these sections will be considered in order.

Young gives an excellent summary of the history of beliefs regarding origins and earth chronology. Detailed chapters review the thoughts of the Greeks, the early church, and past scientists. There is a wealth of fascinating quotes regarding the mystery of fossils and the early debates on earth history. Regarding the earth's age, Young concludes that "until the end of the eighteenth century, Christians were virtually unanimous in the belief that the earth was six thousand years old according to the teaching of scripture" (p. 13). Nevertheless, Young insists that he is "in full agreement with historic Christianity" (p. 10). Modern geology has simply shown that the naive literal reading of Genesis is wrong. Early Christians did not know any better, but we *do* know better today, in Young's mind, and he appears to lose patience with those who still hold to a literal creation view. He finally calls this view a "fantasy" whose promotion must be stopped (p. 152).

One other item in the historical section is of interest. Young mentions the biblical chronology studies of Archbishop Ussher and Bishop Lightfoot. To Young's credit, he honors these men for their scholarship, in contrast to the sarcasm and incredulity about these men one often encounters in the literature. Young might also have included the name of scientists such as Kepler, one of the greatest astronomers of all time and a contemporary of Ussher. Kepler made similar studies of OT genealogies and also arrived at a young age for the creation.

The lengthy center section of Young's book concerns the collection and analysis of scientific data. It is largely an attempt to refute creationist arguments for a recent creation. Young's specialized knowledge in the area of igneous and metamorphic rocks is evident. His limitations in certain other areas are also obvious. He declares, for example, that pressure and temperature changes "have no effect whatever on decay constants" of radioactive

elements (p. 97). However, both of these variables have been used, for decades, to slightly perturb the decay rates of many isotopes. This particular point involves the possible acceleration of radiometric decay in the past and results in an increase in the apparent aging of rocks, admittedly uncertain at this time. Young also scoffs at the suggestion by creationists that increased cosmic radiation in the past may have speeded up the decay of radioactive elements. He does not believe that such radiation could affect rocks, since "cosmic rays do not penetrate very far into the ground" (p. 97). However, energetic cosmic rays are indeed detected in the deepest mines and caves. Such radiation from space has even been suspected of killing off much fauna on the seafloor during the "Permian extinction" of life, a catastrophe that creationists associate with the Genesis flood.

The earth's decaying magnetic field has been proposed as an evidence for a recent creation. Popularized by Thomas G. Barnes, the argument is that the earth's field would have been lethally large in a world more than 10,000 years old. Young analyzes the problem and concludes that the field is probably generated "by some sort of self-sustaining dynamo mechanism" (p. 119). That is, the magnetic field is only temporarily decaying; it will revive itself again and therefore fits geologic time. But this assumed dynamo is just the unsupported mechanism the creationists challenge. Young offers some archaeological magnetic field measurements that appear to differ from Barnes's predictions. Such conflicts show the endless complexities that always arise in discussions of scientific data. One can readily find scientific interpretations or data that will support either an ancient earth *or* a recent creation. It is disappointing that Young gives no update on the earth's decaying magnetic field beyond 1965. New data has been available since 1979 from the American satellite Magsat. The field has now been found to be decaying even faster than was earlier thought. Extrapolation shows that the field strength may reach zero within 1,200 years, with grave consequences for mankind before then. If nothing else, the disappearing magnetic field places a severe time limit on the future of our environment.

Young claims that "creationists have ignored data when convenient and have been very selective in the use of other data" (p. 162). This accusation could be applied almost universally. The value of any writing is to promote a particular viewpoint and with a nearly infinite variety of possible views on any subject, much must necessarily be excluded. This is especially true in the realm of science with its growing reservoir of data. Young himself leaves out certain points that one would expect to find in a book on the age of the earth. For example, he does not explain the research work of Robert Gentry. This well-known scientist has challenged the assumed slow cooling of igneous earth materials. Gentry presents data which suggests an instantaneous creation of the earth's crust. Gentry's conclusions are recognized by the geologic community and are thus far unchallenged. Nor does Young mention the work of Clark and Voss. These scientists have published significant studies in creationist literature indicating that the earth's vast sedimentary layers may have been deposited in just one year of universal flooding. Young also omits any mention of the canopy theory. The great significance of a pre-flood vapor canopy to any study of earth history has been demonstrated in Joseph Dillow's book, *The Waters Above*.

Young accuses creationists of “beating a dead horse” regarding uniformitarianism versus catastrophism (p. 142). The former term refers to present-day physical processes as adequate to account for all past changes of the earth and universe. In contrast, catastrophism recognizes unique global cataclysms in earth’s history, such as the Genesis flood. The common presupposition that “the present is the key to the past” has indeed been challenged, particularly in *The Genesis Flood*. However, Young claims that geologists do not really believe this idea any longer. To prove his point, he lists several geology references that promote limited catastrophism. It is interesting that all of these references date from the 1970s. Secular geology has indeed slowly begun to acknowledge catastrophic events in history, although the uniformitarian perspective is still prevalent. Young himself acknowledges that creationists have made scientists “more aware of the catastrophic aspects of nature and the role they play in geology” (p. 83).

Young counsels Christians to “relax and stop being afraid that somehow or other some scientific evidence will disprove the Bible” (p. 147). The creationist agrees with these sentiments. Young also states that a muzzle should not be put on any Christian in expressing his views (p. 151). He even admits that contemporary science may be wrong: “It is entirely possible that in the future some new discoveries may be made that will lead the scientific community to abandon belief in the great age of the earth” (p. 149). Following this statement, however, there is no doubt that Young does indeed want to put a muzzle on the literal-day creation view. The primary motive for writing *Christianity and the Age of the Earth* suddenly becomes very clear. Young fears the possible offense to those scientists who hold to the secular view of modern geology (p. 152). To protect them, he tells the creationists with their contrary view of earth history to be quiet! Young reasons that “creationism and Flood geology have put a serious roadblock in the way of unbelieving scientists” (p. 152). Certainly, all will agree that creationists should not concentrate on scientific data and debate to the exclusion of a clear gospel presentation. However, if all intellectual barriers to the gospel must first be removed or conceded, we will surely fail. We must first seek to win the hearts of men to the Lord. Then, intellectual details will fall into place. Edward J. Young explained our duty in his *Studies in Genesis One*:

In the study of Genesis one, our chief concern must not be to adopt an interpretation that is necessarily satisfying to the “scientifically penetrating mind.” Nor is our principal purpose to endeavor to make the chapter harmonize with what “science” teaches. Our principal task, in so far as we are able, is to get at the meaning which the writer sought to convey.

Davis Young believes that the creationist view of Genesis is dangerous. However, in the view of many creationists, the day-age theory promotes an equally harmful compromise between scripture and secular science. To both the literal *and* day-age views, the secular evolutionary approach is even more harmful. The solution in our day would appear to be the free presentation of all views in a balanced manner. Meanwhile, research into the fossil record and rocks of the earth should continue to compile more data. Creationists are certainly not out to muzzle other views, or even necessarily to get “equal

time," but they cannot be silent, as Young requests. The literal-day approach to Genesis is a satisfying and credible foundation for millions of believers and must be shared. *Christianity and the Age of the Earth* is recommended for those interested in Davis Young's promotion of progressive creation and his denunciation of creationists. Such reading should be balanced with materials that positively explain the creationist position (see, for example, the preceding review of *What is Creation Science?*).