

Science of earth's birth not set in stone

Ian Fuller

How could a geologist possibly believe in a young earth thousands, not billions, of years old? Paradoxically, I came to consider this alternative creationist paradigm while using radiometric dating to investigate processes that nominally occurred over 200,000 years, for my PhD at the University of Wales, Aberystwyth.¹

There were two reasons to question the old-earth paradigm. First was personal belief. I became convinced through reading the Bible and understanding that, as originally written, it is the infallible word of God. So I came to believe that God created all things in six days because that is what He says in Genesis 1.

The second reason was science. Don't spill your coffee. Yes, I said science. True science is underpinned by observation. But in earth science, the problem

with the past is that it cannot be directly observed. We 'observe' it by looking at the evidence preserved for us, and this is open to interpretation according to the observer's perspective. The observer does not make his or her observations in a vacuum, but is conditioned by his or her world-view, experience and education – in short, by his or her 'faith', which is normally the dominant naturalistic paradigm.

Scientists observe evidence and propose a hypothesis that says something of how we look at the world. But that basic understanding can change. For instance, the way the landscape was



understood in the early 20th century is different from our understanding today. Then, uniformitarianism was *de rigueur*. Now we understand the landscape to be more a product of extreme events. The creationist perspective is simply another way of interpreting the evidence, and it is as scientific as any other. As such, creationist scientists ought not be dismissed out of hand as advocates of antisience, but rather engaged in open debate. This should especially be the case in the context of higher education, where discussion of alternative hypotheses and perspectives are surely the substance of pedagogy.

Understanding a six-day creation does not mean the date of creation week can be precisely tied down. But it does not allow the possibility of an 'old earth'. I wrestled with the dilemma of how I might continue my research if I thought it was wrong. I decided to finish the work and wrote it up using mainstream earth science epistemology. Within that framework it is not wrong as such, although it does contradict my own personal beliefs and understanding.

Since that time I have had to separate my personal views from the current theories underpinning earth science. Our understanding of earth science is never absolute. Indeed, it is always 'evolving' and I fully expect my research to become obsolete in due course. But my creationist beliefs are not subject to such transitory change. In fact, I believe that the more we understand about the nature of the earth system, the closer we will come to recognising the reality of creation, though admittedly probably not in my lifetime.

Fundamentally, I believe the geological record strongly suggests rapid periods of deposition, often catastrophic in nature. The ultimate catastrophe recorded in the Bible was the Flood described in Genesis 6.

There is, inevitably, discussion among creationist scientists as to the timing of the pre-Flood/post-Flood boundary in the geological column. As in any area of science, there is debate about how to interpret the available evidence. Nothing is set in stone, if you excuse the pun.

My colleagues at Northumbria University, where I was a lecturer in physical geography for seven years, thought I was potty but there was no animosity and even some openness to discussion. The focus of my current research at Massey University is now contemporary process geomorphology, which reduces the tension between my personal beliefs and current scientific epistemology. When I teach aspects of earth history that require an old-earth perspective, I make it clear to my students that this is one interpretation of the available evidence.

I strongly believe that creationist arguments should be heard and discussed alongside not only the old-earth perspective but also evolutionary theory. Belief in evolution requires as much faith as belief in creation. Both are theories on origin. Both make *a priori* assumptions that pervade their interpretation of evidence. If evolutionary theory is unassailable, why are its protagonists so concerned? Perhaps their angst is underlain by a realisation that evolution is a theory, not a fact. In a true scientific paradigm, it should be open to scrutiny and testing, as should creationist theory. Education ought to be the forum in which new ideas and perspectives are openly debated. Neither 'side' should have anything to hide nor resort to ridicule. Yet discussion of these arguments

is hindered by a bad atmosphere: mainstream 'science' refuses to consider the alternative hypothesis, as demonstrated in recent outcries at the teaching of creation alongside evolution at Emmanuel College in Gateshead. I think it is time for a change. ■

Footnote

1. You can read about Dr Fuller's research in the following article: Fuller, I.C. (1999). Geochronology in the light. Luminescence dating: a critical review of a new technique. *Origins*, (26):6-8.

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