

THE CONFSSIONAL LUTHERAN PERSPECTIVE ON THE YOUNG-EARTH VS. OLD-EARTH CREATION DEBATE



“We teach that God has created heaven and earth, and that in the manner and in the space of time recorded in the Holy Scriptures, especially Gen. 1 and 2, namely, by His almighty creative word, and in six days.” – *Brief Statement*, paragraph 5

What do Old-Earth Creationists believe?

- Reject evolution and theistic evolution.
- Progressive creationists (main branch of old-earth creationists) believe that each creation day represented a period much longer than 24 hours. The alternative old-earth viewpoint of gap creationism is a minority position as it neither appeases modern science nor Scripture.
- Believe the earth to be ~4.5 billion years old, and the universe to be between 13 to 18 billion years old.
- Believe Scripture and science are in complete harmony, and many go so far as to say that science is the 67th book of the Bible based on verses like Psalm 19:1, “The heavens declare the glory of God; And the firmament shows His handiwork” (NKJV).

Background:

What appeals some ‘conservative’ Lutherans to the old-earth view of creation:

- Many old-earth creationists honestly believe their position is in complete agreement with Scripture and profess that the Bible is both inerrant and teaches that the creation days were not 24 hour days.
- They believe their interpretation is a literal and valid interpretation, and not a doctrinal compromise to secular science.

1 What does Scripture teach?

- a. Genesis 1:5 – God called the light Day, and the darkness He called Night. So the evening and the morning were the first day. (NKJV)
- b. Exodus 31:15-17 - 'Work shall be done for six days, but the seventh is the Sabbath of rest, holy to the LORD. Whoever does any work on the Sabbath day, he shall surely be put to death.

'Therefore the children of Israel shall keep the Sabbath, to observe the Sabbath throughout their generations as a perpetual covenant. 'It is a sign between Me and the children of Israel forever; for in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, and on the seventh day He rested and was refreshed.'" (NKJV)

- c. Matthew 19:4 – And He answered and said to them, “Have you not read that He who made *them* at the beginning ‘made them male and female,’ (NKJV)
- d. Luke 11:49-51 - Therefore the wisdom of God also said, ‘I will send them prophets and apostles, and *some* of them they will kill and persecute,’ that the blood of all the prophets which was shed from the foundation of the world may be required of this generation, from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah who perished between the altar and the temple. Yes, I say to you, it shall be required of this generation. (NKJV)

2 What did the early church teach?

- a. The majority of early church fathers believed that the creation days were natural days. Additionally, a great number of them also tied their eschatological (end times) views with their view of creation days. Many taught that because the world was created in six natural days and God rested on the seventh, the world would persist for six thousand years and Judgment would come on the advent of the seventh. This was based in large part on 2nd Peter 3:8: “...one day is with the Lord as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day.”
- b. A succinct example of this can be found in the words of Lactantius, “Therefore, since all the works of God were completed in six days, the world must continue in its present state through six ages, that is, six thousand years. For the great day of God is limited by a circle of a thousand years, as the prophet shows, who says, “In Thy sight, O Lord, a thousand years are as one day.” (Roberts, Alexander & Donaldson, James; *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325*, Vol. VII; WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, MI, 1956, pg. 211)
- c. Behind each of the following church father or writer’s names indicates whether they were Ante-Nicene (A-N) or Nicene/Post-Nicene writers (N/P-N). The first council of Nicaea was in 325.
 - i. **Understands creation days to be natural days:**
Barnabas (A-N), Theophilus (A-N), Irenaeus (A-N), Hippolytus (A-N), Archelaus (A-N), Victorinus (A-N), Methodius (A-N), Lactantius (A-N), Basil (N/P-N), Ambrose (N/P-N), John Chrysostom (N/P-N), John of Damascus (N/P-N), Cyril of Jerusalem (N/P-N), Ephrem (N/P-N)
 - ii. **Understands creation days as long periods of indefinite length:**
Nemesius (N/P-N)
 - iii. **Understands days as simultaneous:**
Hilary (N/P-N), Augustine (N/P-N)
 - iv. **Understands days as symbolic:**
Clement of Alexandria (A-N), Origen (A-N)
 - v. **Seems to have believed in 24 hour creation days, but inconclusive:**
Justin Martyr (A-N), Epiphanius of Salamis (N/P-N), Jerome (N/P-N)
- d. It is important to be aware of the positions of the early fathers and writers as their views are often misrepresented by old-earth creationists as justification for the toleration for old-earth theology. Old-earth creationists will take brief excerpts from the early fathers when the ancient writers are

discussing their views of eschatology where they state that each creation day corresponds with a thousand years. But when you read the ancient writers in full context, it is clear that they believe each creation day to be a literal day, but that each creation day corresponds with a following thousand years of the earth's existence.

3 What did Luther teach?

- a. "When Moses writes that God created Heaven and Earth and whatever is in them in six days, then let this period continue to have been six days, and do not venture to devise any comment according to which six days were one day. But, if you cannot understand how this could have been done in six days, then grant the Holy Spirit the honor of being more learned than you are. For you are to deal with Scripture in such a way that you bear in mind that God Himself says what is written. But since God is speaking, it is not fitting for you wantonly to turn His Word in the direction you wish to go." (Plass, Ewald, *What Luther Says: An Anthology, Vol. III*, CPH, 1959, pg.1523)
- b. "We must understand that these days were actual days (*veros dies*), contrary to the opinion of the holy fathers. Whenever we observe that the opinions of the fathers agree with Scripture, we reverently bear with them and acknowledge them to be our elders. Nevertheless, we do not depart from the authority of Scripture for their sake." (Plass, Ewald, *What Luther Says: An Anthology, Vol. III*, CPH, 1959, pg.1523)
- c. "If we do not see clearly enough the reason for the days or understand why God chose to use these intervals of time, let us rather confess our ignorance than twist the words away from the fact (*rem*) and give them a foreign meaning. So far, then, as this idea of Augustine is concerned, we certainly hold that Moses spoke literally (*proprie*), not allegorically or figuratively, that is, that the world with all creatures was created within six days, as the words say (*sonant*). If we do not understand the reason why it was done, let us remain pupils and leave the office of teaching to the Holy Spirit." (Plass, Ewald, *What Luther Says: An Anthology, Vol. III*, CPH, 1959, pg.1523f)
- d. "We know from Moses that the world was not in existence before 6,000 years ago." (Luther, Martin, *Luther's Works, Volume 1: Lectures on Genesis Chapters 1-5*, CPH, 1958, pg. 3)

4 What do the Lutheran Confessions teach?

- a. The Book of Concord was written to confess the fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith and to oppose errors that had arisen at that time. Creation time was not a matter in discussion at that time, for Lutherans, Roman Catholics, Zwinglians, and Calvinists agreed that the heavens and earth were created in the space and time of six days. There are a couple statements in the Book of Concord that can only be understood properly if one confessed a 'young' earth. Such as:
 - i. "Matrimony was not first instituted in the New Testament, but in the beginning, immediately on the creation of the human race." (*Concordia Triglotta*, Apology, Article XIII (VII) #14)
 - ii. "Accordingly, when asked, What is meant by the commandment: Thou shalt sanctify the holy day? answer: To sanctify the holy day is the same as to keep it holy. But what is meant by keeping it holy? Nothing else than to be occupied in holy words, works, and life. For the day needs no sanctification for itself; for in itself it has been created holy [from the beginning

of the creation it was sanctified by its Creator].” (*Concordia Triglotta*, Large Catechism, Ten Commandments, 3rd Commandment, #87)

In the ‘old-earth’ world view, marriage and the establishment of the Sabbath are not at the beginning, but at the very end. Marriage and the Sabbath rest would be within the last several thousand years of a multi-billion year old universe and world. Marriage and the establishment of the Sabbath would have happened in the last 0.0001% of the earth’s existence – not the beginning.

Old-earth creationists divide over whether or not human death was designed by God or a result of the Fall. To those who claim that human death is a natural part of creation, the Confessions state:

- iii. “Although the scholastics extenuate both sin and punishment when they teach that man, by his own strength, can fulfil the commandments of God; in Genesis the punishment, imposed on account of original sin, is described otherwise. For there human nature is subjected not only to death and other bodily evils, but also to the kingdom of the devil. For there, Gen. 3, 15, this fearful sentence is proclaimed: *I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed.* The defects and the concupiscence are punishments and sins. Death and other bodily evils, and the dominion of the devil, are properly punishments.” (*Concordia Triglotta*, Apology, Article II (I) #46-47)

5 What are some chief arguments of old-earth creationists and why they are in error?

a. Old-Earth Argument:

“The Hebrew word *yowm*, translated *day*, may be used (and is) within the Bible, as it is in English, to indicate any of four time periods: a) from sunrise to sunset, b) from sunset to sunset, c) a segment of time without any reference to solar days (usually several years), and d) an age or epoch.” – Hugh Ross, *The Fingerprint of God*, Promise Publishing Co. Orange, CA, 1991, pg 147

Response:

It is clear from Scripture that the word “*yom*” can have multiple meanings, and even more meanings when attached to other Hebrew words. The context determines how it is to be translated. The most common use of the word *yom* refers to a regular day (either the period of light or a full 24 hours) as it would be used in standard English. For those uses of *yom* that do not refer to a regular day, here are a few examples:

- *Yom* is commonly used to mean ‘time’ in the general sense (i.e. time, season, day):
 - Genesis 4:3 - And in the process of time it came to pass that Cain brought an offering of the fruit of the ground to the LORD.
- *Yom* is commonly used to mean ‘time’ in the perpetual sense (i.e. continually, perpetually, always, ever):
 - 2nd Chronicles 7:16 - "For now I have chosen and sanctified this house, that My name may be there forever; and My eyes and My heart will be there perpetually.

- *Yom* on a few occasions is used to refer to the age of man (i.e. life, age, years):
 - Joshua 23:2 - And Joshua called for all Israel, for their elders, for their heads, for their judges, and for their officers, and said to them: "I am old, advanced in age."
- *Yom* on a few occasions is used to represent the full given time of weeks, months, or years (i.e. whole, full):
 - Daniel 10:2 - In those days I, Daniel, was mourning three full weeks.
- *Yom* on a few occasions is used to mean 'yearly':
 - 1st Samuel 20:6 - "If your father misses me at all, then say, 'David earnestly asked permission of me that he might run over to Bethlehem, his city, for there is a yearly sacrifice there for all the family.'
- *Yom* on a few occasions represents the time of a 'year' or 'years':
 - 1st Samuel 27:7 - Now the time that David dwelt in the country of the Philistines was one full year and four months.

While it is clear that *yom* is not limited to a 24 hour day or the period of light within a day, there is not one example in all of Scripture where *yom* is used to describe a 'period' (as in an 'age' or 'eon'). Furthermore, never once in Scripture is *yom* used with an ordinal number (i.e. 1st, 2nd, 3rd) to denote a period of time longer than 24 hours.

b. Old-Earth Argument:

"The wording of Genesis 2:4 suggests a long time span for the creation week. This verse, a summary statement for the creation account, in the literal Hebrew reads, "These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created in the day of their making..." Here, the word *day* refers to all six creation days (and the creation events prior to the first creative day). Obviously, then, it refers to a period longer than 24 hours. Hebrew lexicons verify that the word for *generation* (*toledah*) refers to the time it takes a baby to become a parent or to a time period arbitrarily longer. In Genesis 2:4 the plural form, *generations*, is used, indicating that multiple generations have passed." – Hugh Ross, *The Fingerprint of God*, Promise Publishing Co. Orange, CA, 1991, pg 150-151

Response:

The term 'generations' (*towlēdah*) in the Hebrew does not denote "long periods of time," rather, it denotes succession. The most often usage of that word in the Hebrew is as a synonym for 'descendent' or 'proceedings,' as if it were reporting a list of accounts of the past (especially genealogy) rather than periods of time. Consider how it is used in Exodus 28:10, "Six of their names on one stone, and the other six names of the rest on the other stone, according to their birth (*towlēdah*)." The other Hebrew word that is translated to "generation" is *dowr* (*Strong's #1755*). Unlike *towlēdah*, the word *dowr* can denote or mean a period of time. To contrast the meanings of the two words, consider how Genesis 6:9 uses both words in the same sentence, "These are the generations (*towlēdah*) of Noah: Noah was a just man and perfect in his generations (*dowr*), and Noah walked with God."

c. Old-Earth Argument:

“The Hebrew word *ereb*, translated *evening*, also means “sunset,” “night,” or “ending of the day.” And the word *boqer*, translated *morning*, also means “sunrise,” “coming of light,” “beginning of day,” “break of day,” or “dawning” with possible metaphoric usage. In other words, evening and morning refer to the beginning and ending components of “day,” however it is used.” – Hugh Ross, *Creation and Time*, NavPress Publishing Co. Colorado Springs, CO, 1994, pg. 46

Response:

The entire argument that creation days can ‘literally’ be taken as longer than 24 hour days rests on the pattern that context is consistent in using the literal usage of the words, and that that the words ‘morning’ and ‘evening’ can literally be understood as ‘beginning’ and ‘end.’ The above argument breaks down because when verses that use ‘morning’ and ‘evening’ as ‘beginning’ and ‘end’ are shown to use morning/evening in the figurative sense. Psalm 90:6 compares man’s life to grass and speaks figuratively. Job 4:20 is in the context of a chapter full of figurative and poetic language. Daniel 8:26 specifically states that it was a “vision”, and from the descriptions of visions throughout the Scriptures it is evident that they are full of figurative and symbolic language (i.e. much of the book of Revelations). Just like ‘morning’ and ‘evening’ has a figurative sense in the English language, the passages cited show that ‘morning’ and ‘evening’ also have figurative sense in the Hebrew language.

Psalm 90:6, Job 4:20, and Daniel 8:26 show that translating Genesis 1:13 as “And there was an ending and there was a beginning – the third time” is not hermeneutically consistent, that is to say, it is against the basic principles of biblical interpretation to apply figurative meanings of select words in a passage describing a literal event. There are literal words for “beginning” and “end,” but *ereb* (evening) and *boqer* (morning) are not in that list.

If Genesis chapter one is to be taken literally, any chance of the creation day being longer than 24 hours is completely put out of question with the words *ereb* and *boqer*.

d. Old-Earth Argument:

“In Romans 5:12, which speaks of death as the result of sin, the text limits that death to human beings. It clearly specifies the spiritual death of humans, “death through sin... came to all men because all sinned” (for which physical death follows as a God-bestowed blessing), not the physical death of plant and animal species... Plants and non-human animals cannot sin and cannot die through sin.” – Hugh Ross, *The Genesis Question*, NavPress, Colorado Springs, CO, 2001, pg. 100

Response:

While it is certainly true that only humans have the rightful title of ‘sinner’, it is also true that the entire creation was affected by the Fall. The usual proof-text for this is Romans 8:22, “For we know that the whole creation groans and labors with birth pangs together until now” (NKJV). In addition to this, it can be cited that the whole creation will be destroyed by fire as described in 2nd Peter 3:7 & 12, “But the heavens and the earth which now exist are kept in store by the same word, reserved for fire until the day of judgment and perdition of ungodly men” and, “Looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be dissolved,

being on fire, and the elements will melt with fervent heat?” (NKJV). Similarly in Noah’s day the whole earth bore the wrath of God because of man’s sin.

Furthermore, in Genesis 1:30, God provides animals with plants for their food, indicating that present day carnivorous animals were at one time herbivores:

“Also, to every beast of the earth, to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, in which there is life, I have given every green herb for food”; and it was so.

e. Old-Earth Argument:

“In a later miracle (forth day), God transformed Earth’s atmosphere from translucent to transparent. At that time, the Sun, Moon, and stars became visible from Earth’s surface as distinct light sources.” – Hugh Ross, *A Matter of Days*, NavPress, Colorado Springs, CO, 2004, pg. 78

Response:

The text clearly says in Genesis 1:16, “And God made two great lights; the greater light to rule the day, and the lesser light to rule the night: he made the stars also.” The text does not say “God made the sun visible” but simply that He made them, and the stars too.

f. Old-Earth Argument:

“While each of the first six creation days is marked by a beginning (“morning”) and an ending (“evening”), no such boundaries are assigned to the seventh creation day, neither in Genesis 1 and 2 nor anywhere else in the Bible. Given the parallel structure in the narration of the creation days, such a distinct omission from the description of the seventh day strongly suggests that this day has (or had) not yet ended. Hebrews 4:1-11 draws from Psalm 95:11 to signify that God’s day of rest (day seven) continues.” – Hugh Ross, *A Matter of Days*, NavPress, Colorado Springs, CO, 2004, pg. 81

Response:

Hebrews 4:3-11,

For we who have believed do enter that rest, as He has said: “*So I swore in My wrath, They shall not enter My rest,*” although the works were finished from the foundation of the world. For He has spoken in a certain place of the seventh day in this way:

“*And God rested on the seventh day from all His works*”; and again in this place: “*They shall not enter My rest.*”

Since therefore it remains that some must enter it, and those to whom it was first preached did not enter because of disobedience, again He designates a certain day, saying in David,

“*Today,*” after such a long time, as it has been said:

“*Today, if you will hear His voice,*

Do not harden your hearts.”

For if Joshua had given them rest, then He would not afterward have spoken of another day.

There remains therefore a rest for the people of God. For he who has entered His rest has himself also ceased from his works as God *did* from His.

Let us therefore be diligent to enter that rest, lest anyone fall according to the same example of disobedience. (NKJV)

And Psalm 95:8-11,

“Do not harden your hearts, as in the rebellion, As *in* the day of trial in the wilderness, When your fathers tested Me; They tried Me, though they saw My work. For forty years I was grieved with *that* generation, And said, ‘It is a people who go astray in their hearts, And they do not know My ways.’ So I swore in My wrath, ‘They shall not enter My rest.’ ” (NKJV)

These are clearly understood when “rest” and “Sabbath” are understood in the light of Scripture. Moses calls the Sabbath a ‘sign’ in Exodus 31:17, a sign of rest; this sign finds its origin in the seventh day of creation (Exd. 20:11 & 31:17; Heb. 4:4). After God created the world, He rested, and He continues His rest. It was God’s Sabbath, and all Christians will, upon their death, enter God’s rest, His Sabbath-rest. The rest/Sabbath in Hebrews is not referring to earthly days, be they long *yom*’s or 24 hour *yom*’s, for while this sign has its roots in an earthly week, the promises that lie ahead are outside of time. The ‘rest’ mentioned in Psalm 95 was not the Promised Land, but heaven. *According to old-earth reckoning, “we are now living in that 7th day.” But that is not what Hebrews 4 and Psalm 95 say – rather, they say the opposite! It says we will enter that rest – future tense.* Psalm 95:11 says that the wicked will never enter that rest. Therefore these passages cannot be speaking about the seventh creation day/*yom*, but about God’s heavenly rest.

Final exhortations

While this paper focused on the numerous errors of the old-earth view, old-earth creationists are very active in gathering evidence against Darwinism. So while movements like “Intelligent Design” are inherently old-earth and should be viewed with discretion, there is useful information within. Likewise, we must also be on our guard of embracing and joining organizations that defend the young-earth view, for while such organizations provide valuable resources, they may also promote false doctrine and unionism (‘joint worship and work of those not united in doctrine’ – *Concordia Cyclopedia*, 1927). Organizations such as the Institute for Creation Research (ICR) and Answers in Genesis (AiG) are encyclopedias of knowledge, but they also promote false teachings (i.e. ICR denies Christ’s presence in the Lord’s Supper and AiG rejects trusting in the power of the sacraments) and they are inherently unionistic as they have no regard for complete doctrinal agreement from their members.

The inherent advantage of the young-earth view is that it is based solely on God’s unchanging Word. A creation model founded foremost on popular science, which is then forced into Scripture, results in a continually changing interpretation of Scripture as scientific theories change. It may be futile to debate with an errorist who rejects the inerrancy of Scripture as there is no common ground, but when you meet an old-earth errorist who claims to believe in the authority of Scripture, use the greatest tool God has given us – the sword of the Spirit, the Word of God.

To God alone the Glory!