

Apologetics and the Age of the Universe

Appendix B: Apologetics and the Age of the Universe

Note: This is one of two appendices for Steve Cable's article Are We Significant in This Vast Universe?

Is the apparent age of the universe a critical issue for Christian apologetics? I would argue that when we make it a critical issue, we are likely to add another barrier to belief rather than tearing down barriers against belief in Jesus Christ as our Savior.

How should we look at the age of the universe in applying emerging scientific observations in defending our faith? In this appendix, we will take a brief look at this question.

The vast majority of theologians and researchers agree that the actions of the inorganic world are normally governed by a set of physical laws and forces: e.g. gravity, subatomic forces, magnetism, and light waves. By understanding these laws, we can predict both the future and past behavior of physical objects ranging from galaxies to our solar system to airplanes to golf balls. As Christians, we recognize that our Creator God can and does intervene at times to suspend or alter these laws in order to accomplish His purpose: e.g. Jesus walking on the water, healing of the sick. Thus, one of the ways to recognize the presence of our Creator is when we use our understanding of these laws to model backward from our present state and we come to a state in the past that is inconsistent with our current reality. In other words, it appears that some power must have intervened with the natural processes we currently observe because it would be practically impossible to get to our present state simply through natural processes.

Following this logic, there is a growing body of evidence from scientific observation consistent with the following two hypotheses:

1. Life as it exists on this earth is the result of the intentional work of an intelligent designer
2. Humans are significant to the designer of this universe

These two hypotheses are obviously consistent with the Bible. As apologists these hypotheses are very important because they support a biblical prerequisite for coming to God:

And without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him (Heb 11:6).

According to this passage, in order to come to God, we must believe that a God exists and that He wants us to seek Him. In many cases, if we can debunk the popular notion that science proves that there is no Creator God who cares about us, we can open the door to see what the Bible tells us about Jesus Christ, His death and resurrection.

The empirical evidence supporting these two hypotheses is strong whether the earth is 13.7 billion years old or 6,000 years old. However, some of the evidence for the significance of life on earth is based on looking at what it would take to get from an ancient creation event, e.g. big bang, to the current, observable universe. Should we ignore that evidence because it does not assume a young universe interpretation of Genesis 1? Or should we use this evidence to show that even the oldest estimated age for our universe still demands a transcendent Creator to account for life on this earth? I suggest that we don't have to make the age of the universe the central point in defending our faith

against those who do not believe in our Creator God and who need to understand that God sacrificed His Son, Jesus to provide for their redemption from this decaying universe.

One of the areas where this tension between fixed physical laws and supernatural intervention applies is in scientific theories for the origin of the universe. The prevailing scientific view is that the universe is expanding at an increasing rate. Combining this view with what we know about the relevant natural forces implies that all the matter in the universe began expanding from a single point approximately 13.7 billion years ago. If we take as an axiom that the correct interpretation of general revelation through scientific observation and special revelation through the Bible must be consistent, there are three possible situations consonant with that axiom:

1. The scientific data is incomplete, corrupted, or misinterpreted. There are many instances where the current prevailing view of science has been shown by new evidence to be wrong, so this is a definite possibility.

2. The universe is indeed expanding, but it is much less than 13.7 billion years old because it was created at a point where it was already spread out to near its current volume. This is the apparent age argument, i.e., when God creates a living being such as Adam, Adam is going to appear to be physically mature even when he was only seconds old. There are issues with applying this apparent age concept to the age of the universe. For example, we can observe supernovae that are hundreds of thousands of light years away. If the earth is less than 10,000 years old, then we are observing the explosions of stars that never really existed. Why would God want to confuse us in this way? Perhaps because these “past” supernovae are consistent with what would have happened to create the current state of our universe.

3. The interpretation of Genesis 1 as defining the time from the beginning of the universe to the creation of Adam as literally 120 hours is not actually the intent of that passage. This interpretation issue is a continuing topic of debate among evangelical scholars who believe that the Bible is God’s inerrant special revelation.

I can appreciate those who consider finding out which of these three alternatives is correct to be an important life issue. But, it seems clear that selecting the right answer is not a prerequisite for salvation (e.g. see Romans 10:9-10). I encourage Christians to understand how the current state of scientific knowledge can be used as a bridge to share the gospel. For a more detailed discussion of contrasting Christian views on the origins of the universe, see the article “Christian Views of Science and Earth History” on our website.

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