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Response to Kurt P. Wise and Hugh Ross

DAVIS A. YOUNG, Ph.D.

Kurt P. Wise eloquently summarized the case for literal interpretation of Genesis 1–11 and belief in a young earth. He built his case primarily on biblical grounds, downplaying the scientific aspects and conceding that scientists have accumulated “a lot of evidence for an old creation,” and that young-earth creationists have not yet been able to provide a young-earth explanation for most of that evidence. Many young-earth advocates acknowledge that scientific evidence favors an old-earth position.

There is good reason for such a concession. Since the late 18th century, thousands of first-rate geologists and astronomers, including many Christians, have accumulated an ever-increasing abundance of diverse lines of evidence for an ancient earth. By now, the scientific case for millions to billions of years of earth and cosmic history is incontrovertible. Geologists are in infinitely greater agreement about the age of the earth than biblical scholars are about the interpretation of Genesis 1.

The alleged scientific evidence for a young earth advanced by Wise is not persuasive. Scientists determine the salt content of the ocean not only by entry of dissolved ions from river water but also by removal of ions during accumulation of extensive salt deposits. Radiometric dating evidence needs no new interpretation because of discordant results. Discordance of dates obtained by different methods occurs because geologists are dating different geologic events or because of different geochemical properties of the various radioactive elements being used for dating. Geologic events are much more complex than controlled laboratory experiments. Despite the existence of occasional minor discordances, virtually all rock samples yield dates in the range of hundreds of thousands to billions of years.

A major problem confronting adherents of the young-earth view is: “Why do the findings of geology and astronomy differ so drastically from what the literal interpretation of Genesis suggests?” After all, our Creator placed the evidence in the rocks and stars, and all of His works are in complete harmony. We do have a God-breathed, infallible Bible, but we do not have infallible biblical interpreters. Scientific discoveries suggest that we should look more critically at the literal interpretation. For example, the young-earth view, which includes the notion of “no death before the fall” neglects other biblical evidence, such as the final chapters of Job, which treat predation by lions and birds of prey, crushing of ostrich eggs, and the terrifying leviathan as a normal part of creation. Genesis 1:21 mentions creation of the tannanim — sea monsters.

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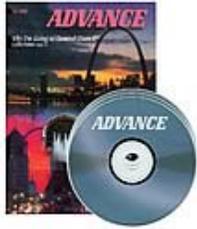
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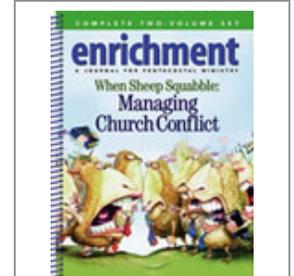
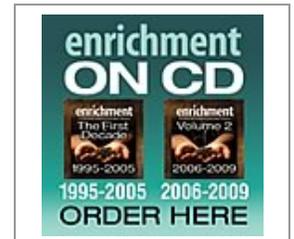
Long out of print but fondly remembered, Advance magazine blessed thousands of A/G ministers. Now the entire Advance archives — 30 years of information and inspiration, helps, and history — is available on CD.

Unfortunately, Wise's literal interpretation and Ross's day-age interpretation both neglect the valuable archaeological findings pertaining to the culture and literature of the ancient Near East. Without that evidence, contemporary interpreters tend to read Genesis 1–11 in light of modern ideas. For example, Wise said that Genesis suggests a global flood that destroyed all the land animals on the planet. But the first readers of Genesis thought of the earth as flat, not a "globe" or a "planet." Ross talked about clearing of the atmosphere on day 2 of Genesis 1, but ancient readers understood the "firmament" to be a solid dome separating the waters above from the waters beneath. Several prominent writers of the Early Church, such as Basil, Ambrose, and Augustine believed there was a crystalline solid dome above.

The 6-plus-1-day structure of Genesis 1 closely resembles examples in second-millennium epic Ugaritic and Babylonian literature where writers typically used this as a literary convention. Writers repeatedly used the number seven as a symbol for completeness and perfection in ancient literature, including the Bible. We do ourselves a disservice by neglecting the wealth of archaeological evidence from the ancient Near Eastern world.

Finally, I am sympathetic to the day-age interpretation advocated by Ross. I formerly adopted that position and have frequently invoked the claims about the great length of day 7 and the improbability that the events of day 6 were compressed into 24 hours. Although these claims call into question the 24-hour-day view, they do not necessarily imply the correctness of the day-age interpretation. Parallels drawn by day-age proponents between the events of the 6 days and geological history are generally strained and import ideas into the text things that are not there. Nor are the parallels as persuasive as advocates believe. Fish appear in the fossil record far earlier than do the earliest birds, for example. In addition, the description of day 4 suggests that God made the heavenly bodies on that day. We read improved visibility owing to transformation of the atmosphere into the text.

A closer look at ancient Near Eastern parallels gives us a window into how the ancient Israelites might have understood the biblical text. And closer attention to established scientific knowledge should help filter out flawed textual interpretations.



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