

Faltering between two opinions: the epistemological conundrum of old-earth creationism

Controversy of the Ages: Why Christians should not divide over the age of the earth

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In a glowing endorsement of *Controversy of the Ages*, Justin Taylor of The [Social] Gospel Coalition, and well-known opponent of biblical ('young earth') creation,¹ writes: "If I had the power to require every Christian parent, pastor, and professor to read two books on creation and evolution ... it would be *40 Questions about Creation and Evolution* (by Kenneth Keathley and Mark Rooker) along with the book you are now holding in your hands."² Having dispensed with the epistemological equivocation of the former,³ I wish to thank the editor for the opportunity to address some of the very same issues with the latter, a book which conveniently happens to be Ken Keathley's "new favourite" on the subject of the age of the earth.

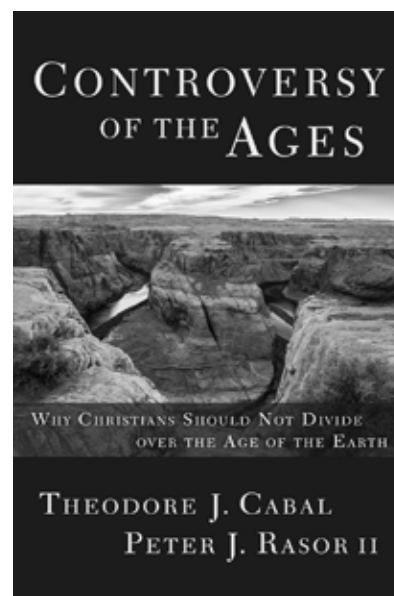
Cabal and Rasor are professors at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. Since Dr Cabal appears to be the primary author, I will at times refer to him in particular. The authors divide creationist positions into three major groups: young-earth creationists (YEC), old-earth creationists (OEC), and evolutionary creationists (EC).

Although the criticisms of YECs' alleged shortsightedness and BioLogos' denial of inerrancy reveal the authors' inclination, Cabal confesses his position in chapter 9:

"My bias is rooted in my conservative evangelicalism. I think the earth is likely old but am not dogmatic about it. I firmly reject universal common descent. I hold with conviction to the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy. And I am consciously motivated by a desire to remain faithful above all to biblical orthodoxy such as the kinds of things [A] Mohler lists as examples of first-level doctrines. ... I believe AiG draws theological boundaries too narrowly and BioLogos too broadly. I have by far the deepest doctrinal concerns regarding the effects of BioLogos on the church. But I also have serious concerns about AiG's effect on the unity of the church" (pp. 190, 210).

Let me state at the onset that while I find many of the assertions made by Cabal and Rasor problematic, I respect their desire to maintain unity within the body of Christ in spite of the various opinions on the age of the earth. Their contention is that "those who believe they understand things rightly, they should humbly and patiently teach so as to nurture the unity of God's church. And if boundaries must be drawn, and at times they must, may they be outlined with exquisite Christian kindness and gentleness" (p. 225).

This is good, biblical advice. It is clear that the issue of division within the body is that with which the authors



appear to be most concerned. I begin the review by commending the authors for exhibiting intellectual humility and their confessedly high view of the doctrines of inerrancy and authority.

That being said, and while I do not wish to anathematize those who perhaps arbitrarily assume vast ages for earth history, the biblical and theological problems with 'evolutionary creation'⁴ go well beyond a disagreement about the age of things, and the authors admit such (p. 95).⁵ Many of their criticisms of BioLogos are shared by YECs and need not be reiterated here. Furthermore, while I adhere to "young-earth creationism" quite strongly, it is not because of a disproportionate obsession with the age of the earth over gospel non-negotiables. My concern is that the authors—like many others sympathetic to the old-earth position—ultimately miss the point of *why* the age of the earth is a point of contention among professing evangelicals.⁶

Cabal warns that "those coming to these pages hoping to find arguments for OEC or against YEC will be disappointed. Rather, the book provides perspective of the lines being drawn by Christians concerning the creation debate" (p. 14). To this end,

the book indeed provides some insight into the nature and history of the debate as well as Cabal's personal experience within this controversy. I think there are lessons to be learned in how we handle not only age of the earth debates but other tertiary doctrines (pp. 189–90)⁷ without glossing over their importance. What becomes apparent very quickly, however, is that epistemological considerations, while alluded to, are not given the necessary attention thus prohibiting the authors from confronting the primary issue when it comes to this *Controversy of the Ages*.

The Galileo affair

Galileo, the Copernican revolution, and the alleged clash of science and theology form the backdrop for evaluating the current age of the earth controversy. While the authors rightly admit that “the prevalent notion that science and theology have been perpetually at war is a myth” (p. 26), a great deal of time is spent trying to convince the reader that the modern conflict between creationist positions is a parallel to the 17th century controversy between the accepted orthodox cosmology and contemporary empirical findings. The implication is that if all parties would admit that they allow science to play a role in hermeneutics, YECs would retract their dogmatism because science is gradually supplying new knowledge to help us more accurately interpret Scripture. In other words, YECs should not embarrass themselves the way the 17th century church had by refusing to interpret the Bible in concert with the new cosmology.

In the first place, the geocentric view was not rooted in Scripture at all but in Aristotelianism.⁸ According to Jonathan Sarfati, “Many historians of science have documented that the first to oppose Galileo was the *scientific establishment*, not the church. The prevailing ‘scientific’ wisdom of his



Figure 1. The Aristotelian/Ptolemaic cosmology (Peter Apian's *Cosmographia* (Antwerp, 1539))

day was the Aristotelian/Ptolemaic theory” [emphasis in original].⁹ Even apart from this, it was just ‘obvious’ that the earth was fixed, and few people until the Middle Ages even thought to consider a moving earth. Schirmacher notes:

“Contrary to legend, both Galileo and the Copernican system were well regarded by church officials. Galileo was the victim of his own arrogance, the envy of his colleagues and the politics of Pope Urban VIII. He was not accused of criticising the Bible, but disobeying a papal decree.”^{10,11}

In Galileo's day, in order for the Roman Church State's interpretation to hold, it had not only to ignore any apparently contrary empirical data but also the fact that Scripture did not demand the Ptolemaic cosmology (figure 1) in the first place. When the contemporary YEC/OEC conflict is compared with the Galileo affair, critics of YEC seemingly hope that we will become embarrassed of our similar stubbornness in disallowing empirical findings to correct our interpretation of Scripture. But what is overlooked is that while the Bible does not provide a defence of the Ptolemaic cosmology, the Bible plainly teaches that “in six days God created the heavens and the earth” (Exodus 20:11).

The Copernican model was not in conflict with any teaching of Scripture¹² so the new cosmology posed

no actual threat to the authority of special revelation. In contrast, every old earth theory is of necessity in conflict with Scripture because the age of the universe is constrained by the biblical timeframe from Adam to Christ. In the current controversy one would be guilty of twisting Scripture to fit “scientific truth” (p. 43, 174)¹³ if he were to interpose vast eons into history despite the plain reading of the Mosaic account and NT affirmation of it. This hardly compares to the Galileo affair in which “[Galileo's] observations challenged the [Roman] Church's authority as the source of truth” (figure 2).¹⁴ There is not much open to interpretation in Genesis 1, so if God actually created the universe billions of years ago, then He surely intended to hide that fact from us by inspiring such a deceptive and misleading narrative.

The apparent motivation for using the Galileo affair as a launching pad in this discussion is to show that, according to Cabal, there is nothing wrong with utilizing science in biblical interpretation and that while both YECs and OECs do it, YECs

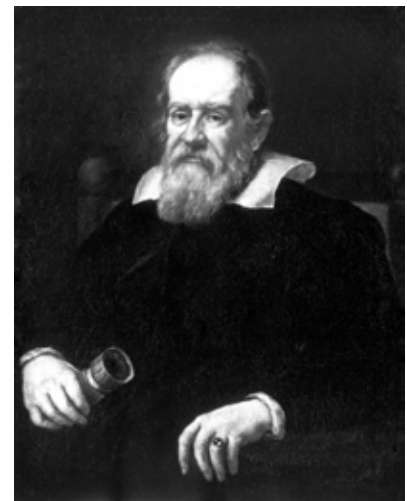


Figure 2. Cabal and Rasor admit that “Galileo also inserted himself into the theological fray at just the wrong time ... with the Counter-Reformation in full swing” (p. 35), and that, “Galileo's actual trial had more to [do] with [insubordination to the papacy] than a science-theology conflict” (p. 47). (Justus Sustermans—Portrait of Galileo Galilei, 1636.)

are hypocritical and inconsistent by lambasting OECs for their admission of such. For example: “Biblical interpretation influenced by science is not new, but when OECs do it, some YECs accuse them of submitting the Bible to ‘evolutionary’ science” (p. 159); “YECs themselves practice the very same approach by correlating their biblical interpretations in light of science they believe true. But condemning others for doing the same is hardly consistent or considerate” (p. 170). The book is full of examples of YEC utilization of scientific data in forming speculative *models*, but this cannot be confused with reinterpreting Scripture in accordance with science.

OEC's convoluted epistemology

I have contended that science should play no role in exegesis but that the student of Scripture adhere to the grammatical-historical hermeneutic.¹⁵ Such was the interpretative method that gave rise to the great Reformed confessions, all of which attested to the creation of the world in six literal days. This is significant because the formulation of the confessions predates the YEC/OEC controversy. Why did the framers of these theologically robust confessions bother to include a statement on the days of creation? It certainly wasn't because of some particular scientific data (or lack thereof). And it wasn't because they had an unbalanced obsession with the age of the earth and any such “level-three” doctrine. Their systematic formulation of key doctrines was rooted in Scripture as the source of knowledge rather than the imprecise epistemological smorgasbord so favourable to modern evangelicalism.¹⁶ The Westminster Confession (1646), Savoy Declaration (1658), and London Baptist Confession (1677/1689) all maintain that God created “in the space of six days, and all very good”. Yet, when YECs speak with unwavering confidence in the perspicuity of the

Genesis text and defend this historic formulation of the doctrine of creation, they are rebuked for making third-order doctrines primary.

The authors rightly assert that the “central methodological issue at stake [is] epistemological authority” (p. 42). Yet, repeatedly in the book we are confronted with statements like the following:

“[We should be reluctant to] adjust biblical interpretation unless proven science made clear the biblical interpretation had been wrong” (p. 209); “... No conflict exists between the truth of the Bible and God's creation” (p. 223);

“Both science and theology involve interpreting data (nature and the Bible)” (p. 21, footnote); “God is the author of the book of nature and the book of Scripture” (p. 45); and

“God's two books rightly interpreted cannot contradict. If the science is demonstrably true, then the conflicting biblical interpretation must be wrong” (p. 46).

Among other things, note the faulty “God's two books” approach to general and special revelation. Since general revelation is non-propositional, it must be interpreted within a worldview. The Bible, on the other hand, *is* propositional, not “interpreted” the way data must be.¹⁷ Further, what do the authors mean by “proven science” and “science ... demonstrably true”? Science is always tentative and, according to Karl Popper, furnishes “no ‘knowledge’ in the sense in which Plato and Aristotle used the word,”¹⁸ nor in the sense in which the Bible uses the word¹⁹ (or what Augustine meant by a “demonstrable fact”^{20,21}). If epistemological issues were squarely dealt with by the authors the real conflict would have to be not with YECs but with the philosophers and theologians who had long exposed the failure of empiricism.

The authors insist that declaring YEC and its central tenets (particularly

no animal death before the Fall) a “gospel issue” is “reckless” (p. 204). As usual, they overlook that human death alone is a problem for long ages, since their beloved ‘dating’ methods place fossils of dead humans—even murdered humans—before Adam. And while it is true that the “gospel issue” designation has been applied indiscriminately at times, it is ironic that Al Mohler—the one to whom the authors credit their “theological triage” method—gave a keynote address at ICR's 40th anniversary banquet subtitled, “Why creation is a gospel issue.”²² In his presentation, Mohler announces that “the pastors who are here, you are here because of a stance you have taken on behalf of the authority and inerrancy of the word of God.”²³ Likewise, reformed Baptist theologian Dr Richard Barcellos writes: “Does the gospel relate to the days of creation? I think it does Creation and new creation are vitally related in the biblical drama of revelation. Redemption by Christ is connected to creation in the space of six days.”²⁴ So much for relegating six-day creation to the periphery of Christian doctrine.²⁵

Of course, according to Cabal's own testimony, he affirms the authority and inerrancy of Scripture (pp. 22, 190). He contends that the issue is not with the alleged OEC rejection of inerrancy but with a mere difference of interpretation. But just as we have seen with other OEC spokesmen, the necessary exegesis of the Genesis text is lacking in such a proposal. It is hardly satisfactory for a biblical inerrantist to argue for an old earth yet fail to provide his interpretation of the relevant texts. My admonition of Keathley is likewise applicable here.²⁶

As the clarity of the Protestant confessions attest and the history of Christian doctrine confirms, the creation account is hardly an interpretive quagmire. After showing the incompatibility of old-earth theories with the historical narrative

of Genesis, Sam Waldron defends the historic confessional teaching on creation asserting thus: “If such language [in the Genesis narrative] is not intended to be taken literally, then it appears impossible to know with any certainty at all what the Bible intends to be understood literally and what it does not. There would then be an end to any meaningful assertion of biblical clarity or authority.”²⁷

Additional problems

Space does not permit a rebuttal to the numerous errant assertions made about YECs which are intended to form a cumulative case overturning our position that exegesis must not depend on scientific data. At times the authors use the word “transmutation” in reference to evolution and at other times to speciation. In this way they make the same mistake as both Ken Keathley and Hugh Ross in conflating speciation with evolution in what reeks of deliberate equivocation.²⁸ They write: “When does the degree and rate of YEC speciation become evolutionary itself? ... Without doubt, the employment of broad speciation in the service of anti-evolutionary YEC models is counterintuitive” (p. 146). Such confusion is unacceptable in light of the volume of YEC literature on the subject of speciation. The baraminic boundaries were set by God during Creation Week and speciation does not “become evolutionary” at any point.

Additional confusion surfaces when the authors take up radiometric dating, the geologic column and discarded YEC models.²⁹

Conclusion

A systematic defence of six-day creation about 6,000 years ago and a global flood is not an obsessive, unbalanced commitment to a tertiary doctrine but is first and foremost concerned to faithfully exposit and defend Scripture’s record of history. As

helpful as the theological triage concept is, it is also important to remember that theology is not a collection of fragmentary disconnected doctrines, but true propositions forming the fabric of an interwoven system. It is impossible to completely isolate and separate the tertiary doctrines from primary or secondary ones.

The authors want us to accept that both YECs and OECs interpret the Bible using science, and that doing so is not a problem. But if creationists only held to a “young” earth because of science, then they should be challenged to reconsider the role the Bible plays in their worldview.³⁰ We should not be YECs because “scientific truth corrected biblical interpretation” (p. 43). We should accept a recent six-day creation and global flood because of Scripture’s plain and perspicuous rendering of historical events, and be prepared to stand unthreatened by the epistemological futility³¹ of the natural man and his empiricism.³²

Christians should charitably accept Cabal’s testimony that he believes in inerrancy and authority, but YECs cannot help but find OEC talking points inconsistent with such a testimony. Old-earthers continually miss the point that “billions of years” is not some arbitrary target of bloodthirsty fundamentalists. There is evidence that acceptance of vast ages—and its corollary of death before sin—has at times served as a slippery slope resulting in more serious departures. Mortenson, Crowe and others have shown that “the compromise of [Charles] Hodge, [A.A.] Hodge, and [B.B.] Warfield, in spite of their good intentions and sincere evangelical faith, contributed to the eventual victory of liberal theology at Princeton after the latter’s death.”³³

But even if doctrinal downgrade is averted and one’s theology remains intact, there are still major hermeneutical and epistemological issues at hand, as we have briefly seen. If science informs our interpretation of the creation narrative, why does

science stop short of informing our interpretation of the Resurrection narrative? Since science ‘informs’ us that dead people do not rise from the grave, perhaps the proper interpretation of Christ’s burial account is that He was only three *minutes* in the grave, being not actually deceased. Of course, Cabal would not argue that science prohibits the Resurrection. But the point is that here arises an issue of foundational importance, that of epistemological consistency. On what basis can one restrict the hermeneutical integration of ‘scientific truth’ only to the creation and flood narratives? What parameters keep empiricism from ‘correcting’ other historical events recorded in Scripture? It seems the liberals are more consistent in applying such a higher critical filter to the whole canon, which is precisely why YEC concerns about concessions to non-revelational “truth” are worth heeding.

My main concern for those who take an opposing view on the age of the earth is not so much that a Christian holds to an old earth, but *why* he holds to an old earth. For all the talk about biblical authority and inerrancy, this point seems to be lost on Cabal and Rasor. They acknowledge that BioLogos is unorthodox in its view of inerrancy. As such, proponents of EC are free to twist and contort the text of Scripture however they see fit. But for the one who professes to uphold the authority and inerrancy of God’s Word, OEC is not just simply a difference of interpretation but is necessarily rooted in and defended by an appeal to extra-biblical non-propositional data.

Contra Cabal and Rasor, the age of the earth really is not an “extremely difficult biblical, theological, scientific and philosophical debate” (p. 224) at all when a revelational epistemology is upheld and consistent hermeneutic applied. So I agree with them that Christians should not divide over the age of the earth—old-earthers should cease their divisive *Scriptura sub Scientia* approach!

References

- Cosner, L., Biblical reasons to affirm the creation days were 24-hour periods: A response to Justin Taylor of The Gospel Coalition, creation.com/justin-taylor-response, 3 February 2015.
- Why Christians should not divide over the age of the earth, blogs.thegospelcoalition.org, 8 May 2017.
- Sabato, N., Irreconcilable records of history and muddled methodology: book review of '40 Questions about Creation and Evolution', by Ken Keathley and Mark Rooker, *J. Creation* 30(1): 19–24, 2016.
- 'Evolutionary creation' is the authors' (and BioLogos') preferred term to 'theistic evolution'.
- Chapters 8 and 9 address some of these concerns. It is also telling that everyone the authors list as "influential evangelicals" (p. 23) serving as endorsees to BioLogos are on the outer fringes of orthodoxy. Denis Lamoureux's claim that "evolutionary creationists enjoy a personal relationship with Jesus" (p. 73) marks a greatly diminished testimony compared to the confessional precision of those who understand the doctrine of justification. Such bears witness to the state of evolutionized evangelicalism.
- A note on the term "evangelical" which the authors admit has been "difficult to define" (p. 21): The broad spectrum of groups listed by Cabal and Rasor as deserving of the title is a bit suspect and may help to explain why such lenience is given to an allegedly (relatively) peripheral subject like the age of the earth.
- The term 'theological triage' was popularized by Dr Al Mohler and can be a helpful one in assessing the relative importance of various doctrines. The authors' application of this concept is the focus of study in chapter 9. See Mohler, R.A., Jr, A call for theological triage and Christian maturity, July 12, 2005; albertmohler.com/2005/07/12/a-call-for-theological-triage-and-christian-maturity.
- Clark, G.H., *Modern Philosophy*, The Trinity Foundation, Unicoi, TN, pp. 32–35, 2008.
- Sarfati, J., Galileo quadricentennial: myth vs fact, *Creation* 31(3):49–5; creation.com/galileo-quadricentennial.
- Schirmacher, T., The Galileo Affair: history or heroic hagiography, *J. Creation* 14(1):91, 2000.
- William Webster similarly recalls that "[Rome] condemned the theory because, in its view, it was contrary to the teachings of Scripture and the Church possessed the infallible right to determine the proper interpretation of Scripture It was not that the Bible itself was wrong, but that the particular interpretation the Roman Catholic Church had adopted was wrong." Webster, W., *The Church of Rome at the Bar of History*, The Banner of Truth Trust, Carlisle, PA, p. 69, 1995.
- As long as the scriptural use of phenomenological or reference-frame language is admitted. The denial of this type of language is exemplified in the erroneous statement of geocentricist Gerardus Bouw: "If God cannot be taken literally when he writes of the 'rising of the sun,' then how can he be taken literally in writing of the 'rising of the Son?" (p. 201). Compare Carter, R. and Sarfati, J., Why the Universe does not revolve around the Earth: Refuting absolute geocentrism, creation.com/geocent, 12 February 2015, updated 19 July 2017.
- I object to the term 'scientific truth' first because it presupposes the validity of the competing epistemology of empiricism. "Truth, of course, is an insuperable problem for empiricism: Truth cannot be derived from something non-propositional, such as 'observations.' Unless one starts with propositions, one cannot end with propositions." Robbins, J.W., *Without a Prayer: Ayn Rand and the Close of Her System*, The Trinity Foundation, Unicoi, TN, p. 78, 2006.
- MacCulloch, D., *Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years*, Viking, New York, p. 684, 2009. MacCulloch attributes Rome's dogmatism in the Galileo affair to the "papacy's defensiveness after Luther's rebellion Galileo's trial also happened during the Thirty Years War . . . a time when the Pope was feeling unusually vulnerable".
- Sabato, N., A theologian's disappointing departure from biblical creation, *J. Creation* 28(3):125, 2014.
- "[Empiricists] have exchanged infallible propositional revelation . . . for fallible sense experience Thomas Aquinas, the great thirteenth-century Roman Catholic theologian, tried to combine two axioms in his system: the secular axiom of sense experience, which he obtained from Aristotle, and the Christian axiom of revelation, which he obtained from the Bible. His synthesis was unsuccessful Today the dominant form of epistemology in putatively Christian circles . . . is empiricism. Apparently today's theologians have learned little from Thomas' failure." Robbins, ref. 13, p. 337.
- Scripture is 'interpreted' (in the sense of determining authorial intent), but not in the way that non-propositional sensory data must be. This is just one example of equivocation by the authors.
- As cited in Robbins, ref. 13, pp. 256–257.
- "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding" (Proverbs 9:10). See also Proverbs 1:7 and Colossians 2:3.
- Sibley, A., Lessons from Augustine's *De Genesi ad Litteram—Libri Duodecim*, *J. Creation* 27(2): 71–77, 2013.
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- Mohler, ref. 22, timestamp 0:01:40.
- Barcellos, R.C., *Better than the Beginning: Creation in Biblical Perspective*, Reformed Baptist Academic Press, Palmdale, CA, p. 88, 2013.
- Granted, in the article (ref. 7), Mohler does not mention the age of the earth and we would assume that he would not categorize such as a "first-order doctrine". However, he rightly contends that "the truthfulness and authority of the Holy Scriptures must . . . rank as a first-order doctrine", and this—not the age of the earth *per se*—is the heart of the issue. While Cabal and Rasor affirm the authority and inerrancy of Scripture, their empirically tainted hermeneutic only serves to cast doubt on Scripture's perspicuity.
- "... If [one] is truly convinced that his embrace of old-earth creationism does not subvert the authority and inerrancy of Scripture, then he is obliged to provide the exegetical substrate for his position. However, not even once does he defend his unidentified brand of old-earthism from the text of Scripture. This fact alone makes it plain that he is not treating the Scripture as his authority, at least not when it speaks to the subjects of creation and the Flood. It is quite insufficient . . . to merely take up a vague 'old-earth creationism' without addressing the biblical text and without putting forth one of the inevitable compromise 'solutions'. If a professing Christian wants to be an old-earthier, it is incumbent upon him to find—rather, force—the oldness somewhere [into] the text" (Sabato, ref. 15).
- Waldron, S.E., *A Modern Exposition of the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith*, 5th edn, EP Books, Welwyn Garden City, UK, p. 91, 2016.
- Sabato, N., Yet another old-earthier accuses a creationist of believing in evolution, creation.com/keathley-ham, 12 April 2016.
- Andrew Snelling is targeted as an example of a YEC who reinterprets Genesis because of scientific data (p. 177) and Terry Mortenson as one who is soft on the scriptural geologists despite their own inconsistencies in the handling of God's Word.
- The issue of epistemology is all too often overlooked, but Joel Tay has it right: "... since induction is always a formal logical fallacy, scientific models are always held loosely and never elevated to the same epistemic level as Scripture. . . . This is . . . the reason why it is necessary to hold to biblically deduced propositions authoritatively and scientifically inferred models loosely." Tay, J., *Design by intuition: good biology, naive philosophy*, *J. Creation* 31(2):47, 2017.
- I am indebted to William Downing for the phrase "epistemological futility", which adequately describes the "wisdom of the world" (foolishness with God) upon which the unregenerate man is dependent. See Downing, W.R., *The Bible and the Problem of Knowledge*, PIRS Press, Morgan Hill, CA, 2006 or my review in *Creation Research Society Quarterly* 52(3):226–227, 2016.
- To illustrate this point, one should not reject Christ's 'real presence' in the eucharist because biochemical analysis fails to reveal hypostatic DNA. One should reject any such teaching on hermeneutical grounds recognizing Christ's use of figurative language. We do not need the discoveries of modern science to rightly interpret God's Word, we simply need a return to the grammatical-historical method.
- Mortenson, T. and Ury, T.H., (eds.) *Coming to Grips with Genesis: Biblical Authority and the Age of the Earth*, Master Books, Green Forest, AR, p. 97, 2008. For a masterful account of Princeton's gradual degeneration, see Crowe, D.D., *Creation Without Compromise*, CBP, Brisbane, creation.com/s/10-2-651, 2009.