



ELIZABETHTOWN
CHURCH OF THE BRETHREN

PRACTICING PEACE, SERVICE AND OPENNESS TO ALL

*Mythbusters: Debunking Young
Earth Creationism*

Genesis 1–3

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Good Morning!

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This Sunday we kick off our new series “Mythbusters” where we will be challenging some of the harmful “Myths” found in much of popular Christianity.

Over the next four weeks we will be exploring biblical literalism, The Satan, and hell, and today we will be looking at Young Earth Creationism. Something to point out from the start is that given the title of this series you might think that Myths are always a bad thing. And while for this series we will be pointing out four myths we feel can have a negative impact on Christianity today, Myths are not always, by definition, inherently problematic.

For many Christians today, there is an assumption that these four “myths” of Satan, hell, biblical literalism and Young Earth Creationism are ancient and foundational to scripture and our faith, but that is not always the case. We have chosen to look into these topics because we do a disservice to the scripture and to our faith when we continue to pass along outdated and unbiblical teachings that can have harmful and negative impacts on the church and society.

The reality is that the History of Christianity is varied and complex. From the writing and organization of scripture to the historical decisions about creeds and doctrine. A quick survey of Christian History can reveal a number of positive additions over the centuries, new forms of prayer and worship, theological critiques and writings, music, and practices like communion and feet washing. There are unfortunately also numerous examples of Christian practices that have not been positive like The Crusades, Spanish Inquisition and puppet ministries. Just kidding.

For many churches, these are sacred cows and even being willing to have honest open discussions about such topics is taboo. I am incredibly grateful to be a part of a faith community that is willing to confront and wrestle with such topics. But, given the strong opinions surrounding these issues we

2 seek to be open for conversation and truly desire genuine spiritual growth.

I will be kicking off this series on the subject of Young Earth creationism and it is probably best to start by defining the term so that we are all on the same page. “Young Earth Creationism” is a belief that the world was created more or less in its current form around 6,000 years ago. It is believed that this creation event took place in 6 literal, 24 hour days in accordance to the first chapters of Genesis. This belief system requires understanding Genesis as both a literal History and accurate scientific account. Importantly, another significant part of Young Earth creationism necessarily requires a rejection of most scientifically accepted positions about the age of the earth from studies of geology, anthropology and biology.

Now, it is important for me to note from the start, that believing in Young Earth Creationism is not the same thing as holding a foundational belief about God as the Creator of the Universe. It would be expected that Christians understand God as the Creator, but that does not require a belief that the world is only 6,000 years old. It is my hope that this morning we might all be able to understand this distinction and be able to appreciate the amazing, elegant and beautiful creativity of God without needing to accept a Young Earth Creationist view of scripture.

It is not my intention to arrogantly dismiss or belittle those who hold this belief; after all, I too once bought into these ideas through many of my teenage years. However, I do think it is important that we name the implications of holding such a belief system, and debunk it as a required litmus test for Christianity. Some things that Young Earth Creationism demands its adherents to believe are: Humans Co-existed with Dinosaurs and all other animals living today. Adam and Eve were the first and only humans when they had their children, and their children procreated with one another. The trusted practices in geology, archeology and radiocarbon dating are flawed or an intentional hoax. The promotion of evolution and other scientific theories are wicked and evil. The world

was created around 4,000 BC and that is calculated by adding up the genealogical information provided in Genesis Ch 5. That chapter lists lifespans and the ages for individuals when they had children. This includes the belief that these first descendants had incredibly long life spans of 7, 8 and 900 years..., for those of you wondering Methusala was the oldest living to the ripe old age of 969. Perhaps most importantly it is required to understand scripture as historically and scientifically flawless.

So with that last idea in mind, lets jump right into scripture with the very first verses of the Bible in Genesis 1: I am going to read a long excerpt from verse 1–31.

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. 2 Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.

3 And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. 4 God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness. 5 God called the light "day," and the darkness he called "night." And there was evening, and there was morning—the first day.

6 And God said, "Let there be a vault between the waters to separate water from water." 7 So God made the vault and separated the water under the vault from the water above it. And it was so. 8 God called the vault "sky." And there was evening, and there was morning—the second day.

9 And God said, "Let the water under the sky be gathered to one place, and let dry ground appear." And it was so. 10 God called the dry ground "land," and the gathered waters he called "seas." And God saw that it was good.

11 Then God said, "Let the land produce vegetation: seed-bearing plants and trees on the land that bear fruit with seed in it, according to their various kinds." And it was so. 12 The land produced vegetation: plants bearing seed according to their kinds and trees bearing fruit with seed in it according to their kinds. And God saw

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that it was good. 13 And there was evening, and there was morning—the third day.

14 And God said, “Let there be lights in the vault of the sky to separate the day from the night, and let them serve as signs to mark sacred times, and days and years, 15 and let them be lights in the vault of the sky to give light on the earth.” And it was so. 16 God made two great lights—the greater light to govern the day and the lesser light to govern the night. He also made the stars. 17 God set them in the vault of the sky to give light on the earth, 18 to govern the day and the night, and to separate light from darkness. And God saw that it was good. 19 And there was evening, and there was morning—the fourth day.

20 And God said, “Let the water teem with living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the vault of the sky.” 21 So God created the great creatures of the sea and every living thing with which the water teems and that moves about in it, according to their kinds, and every winged bird according to its kind. And God saw that it was good. 22 God blessed them and said, “Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the water in the seas, and let the birds increase on the earth.” 23 And there was evening, and there was morning—the fifth day.

24 And God said, “Let the land produce living creatures according to their kinds: the livestock, the creatures that move along the ground, and the wild animals, each according to its kind.” And it was so. 25 God made the wild animals according to their kinds, the livestock according to their kinds, and all the creatures that move along the ground according to their kinds. And God saw that it was good.

26 Then God said, “Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals,[a] and over all the creatures that move along the ground.”

27 So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

28 God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.”

29 Then God said, “I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food. 30 And to all the beasts of the earth and all the birds in the sky and all the creatures that move along the ground—everything that has the breath of life in it—I give every green plant for food.” And it was so.

31 God saw all that he had made, and it was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning—the sixth day.

It’s beautiful, It really is, this creation story speaks to the creative powers of God. There is strong language and bold imagery. These verses speak to the strength and Might of God who Speaks things into existence and does so in a very orderly and formulaic way. This presents God as a kingly ruler able to decree the world into existence bringing order from chaos.

But where did this version of the story come from? Who wrote down this explanation of Creation and why?

This is where we can start to see how Young Earth Creationists arrive at their understanding, and where Biblical literalism plays the key role. In 2 weeks you will hear Pastor Pam speak more in depth on that specific topic. However, there is no way to understand Young Earth Creationism without knowing that it is rooted in Biblical literalism which in this case means an unwavering belief that Moses himself wrote the book of Genesis, along with the rest of what we refer to as the Pentatuch, (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy) under the direct guidance of God. Young Earth Creationists therefore believe that Moses is communicating a literal description directly from God about how the Earth was created.

Most Biblical Scholars generally agree that Moses did not write the Pentatuch. There are some obvious concerns like

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“If Moses was the author, how did he write about his death in Deuteronomy?” But the most convincing evidence generally comes from textual analysis and source criticism, which carefully evaluates the Hebrew text, examining the word choice and syntax. This tedious process has led many Biblical scholars to accept a “documentary hypothesis” for Genesis and other books of the Pentateuch. Without going into too much detail, instead of the Pentateuch being written by a single author, Moses, it was most likely a combination of 4 distinct sources, which themselves may have been informed by multiple voices and oral traditions.

It is worth pausing here to note that just because Moses may not have been the author of Genesis, this should not minimize the value and authority that these scriptures have in our lives. Digging into the texts to discover information about the history and authorship only adds to the value and context for scripture. It is out of a deep appreciation of scripture that these concepts are taken seriously. A “Plain,” flat and literal reading of Genesis that relies on the lore of Mosaic Authorship does not serve a people seeking to better understand the Bible.

So now let’s turn back to scripture. The popular passage that we read in Genesis 1 is believed to have come from a source, which was likely written in the 6th century during the time Jewish leaders were living in exile in Babylon. You likely noticed that this first creation story did not contain anything about Adam and Eve a serpent or forbidden fruit. That is because those things are a part of a second creation story found in the next chapter, let’s take a look. As I read this passage consider how this other creation story differs from the first... Genesis 2:4.

This is the account of the heavens and the earth when they were created, when the Lord God made the earth and the heavens.

5 Now no shrub had yet appeared on the earth and no plant had yet sprung up, for the Lord God had not sent rain on the earth and there was no one to work the ground, 6 but streams came up from the earth and watered the whole surface of the ground. 7 Then the

Lord God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.

8 Now the Lord God had planted a garden in the east, in Eden; and there he put the man he had formed. 9 The Lord God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground — trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food. In the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

10 A river watering the garden flowed from Eden; from there it was separated into four headwaters. 11 The name of the first is the Pishon; it winds through the entire land of Havilah, where there is gold. 12 (The gold of that land is good; aromatic resin[d] and onyx are also there.) 13 The name of the second river is the Gihon; it winds through the entire land of Cush.[e] 14 The name of the third river is the Tigris; it runs along the east side of Ashur. And the fourth river is the Euphrates.

15 The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. 16 And the Lord God commanded the man, “You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; 17 but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die.”

18 The Lord God said, “It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.”

19 Now the Lord God had formed out of the ground all the wild animals and all the birds in the sky. He brought them to the man to see what he would name them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name. 20 So the man gave names to all the livestock, the birds in the sky and all the wild animals.

But for Adam no suitable helper was found. 21 So the Lord God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man’s ribs[g] and then closed up the place with flesh. 22 Then the Lord God made a woman from the rib[h] he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man.

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23 *The man said, "This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called 'woman,' for she was taken out of man."*

24 *That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh.*

25 *Adam and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame.*

This account is different from the first reading; stylistically it is in a more narrative form than the poetic repetition found in Chapter 1. Organizationally, it describes Creation in a different order, instead of plants on Day 3, animals on Day 5 and humans on Day Six, Genesis 2 mentions humans first than plants and then animals for Adam to name. This second creation story in ch 2 is most likely from an earlier source, which originated during the Monarchies of Jewish History before the Babylonian Exile.

This source also consistently uses a different name for God than Chapter 1, while in Genesis 1 Elohim is used for God. In this second account starting at ch 2:4 the compound, YHWH or Yahweh Elohim is used.

Because these two separate creation accounts are found back to back, we often assume they are the same story despite being composed at different times by different people. In Genesis 1 we find God creating population groups, birds of the air, creatures of the sea, animals "according to their kind" and "mankind" as a group. This is the plural form of the word for Man or Adam being used. Adam is not used as a name in Genesis 1, it is first used in its singular form as an individual name in Genesis 2. It is possible we tend to read "mankind" or "humankind" in chapter 1 as the original couple, Adam and Eve, because we retroject the account from chapter 2 into chapter 1.

So if these chapters in Genesis were intended to be a clear historical and scientifically accurate account, why are there two different stories? The simplest and most important answer to that question, and perhaps one of the most important things to take away from this morning, is that these verses were

never written with the intent of being understood as literal historical and scientific accounts.

It is difficult for us to accept that answer because as humans living in Western culture, after the enlightenment and scientific revolution, we put a premium and authoritative value on scientific and historical accuracy. We forget the world did not always operate in this way. For most of history Capital T Truth was explained through allegory and metaphor, not verified data, through storytelling and song, not primary source accounts of history. We are imposing and seeking a contemporary standard for an ancient text. Using modern insight, metrics and science to discover truths about the past is different than expecting our ancestors operated in the same way in their own time. New Testament scholar John Dominic Crossan says it this way “My point, is not that those ancient people told literal stories and we are now smart enough to take them symbolically, but that they told them symbolically and we are now foolish enough to take them literally.”

While it is true that people over the centuries have used the genealogies in the Bible to calculate the earths creation to around 4,000 BC, there have also been important Christian thinkers like Thomas Aquinas in 13th century, Augustine in the 5th and Origen in the 3rd who all held an allegorical reading of Genesis, not a literal, historical and scientific one.

So if you find yourself wondering, “well which one of those two creation accounts is actually more accurate, more historically or scientifically correct,” than you are missing the point entirely. It is important to understand that the authors of what we might call “History” throughout most of the Old Testament scripture are not Historians by the modern sense of the word, but storytellers who are looking to their past traditions to say something, not only about their past, but also about their present.

These first chapters in Genesis are loaded with symbolism that would take many sermons to scratch the surface of. There are likely symbolic references throwing shade on other popular Babylonian creation accounts like the Enuma Elish, Creative

10 References to Wind and Breath, Adam being formed from earth and taking the same word as his name.

Not to mention the whole account of the serpent and the Trees of life and Knowledge. These creation accounts are not only stories about Creation but a prologue for the book of Genesis and the rest of the Old Testament.

The story of Creation is simultaneously an origin story for the Earth and a story of us as a people, there are threads that echo the evolution and anthropology of humanity, a loss of innocence as humans wear clothing and become more knowledgeable, less like animals more like humans. Cain ultimately advancing on to civilization after killing his brother, surpassing Abel's prehistoric hunter gather lifestyle with his life of agriculture.

When we only read the text for its literalism we miss the rich and valuable symbolism. But this is not the only loss that comes with Young Earth Creationism. Generations of children are being taught to fundamentally distrust empirical evidence. Despite many people finding the idea of humans riding dinosaurs comical, this is not like a small "flat earth" fringe group, Young Earth Creationism is embraced by millions. Answers in Genesis, probably the most prominent leader of this movement operates the Creation Museum as well as the "Ark Encounter" a life size replica of Noah's ark, which does include dinosaurs alongside the other animals on the Ark. Is also a huge media producer and overall influencer in this movement. They have recently celebrated their 25th anniversary and have grown to around 1,000 staff members. Their adult Sunday school curriculum has been used in over 10,000 congregations and their VBS curriculum is very popular, one of the top 3 sold in the world.

I only mention this success to show that these are not fringe ideas but are held and circulated widely within Western Christianity. Despite the success of groups like AIG polling has revealed that fewer people today hold these views than in the past. Still, according to a 2017 Gallup poll, 38%—more than one in three—Americans believe "God created humans

in present form within last 10,000 years” That number increases to 65% nearly 2 out of 3 for weekly church goers.

This movement has remained powerful because it has positioned itself as the only correct way to understand scripture, that anything else represents a failure of faith. Smart adults are able to disregard otherwise credible information because such evidence has been associated with the evil. It is black and white, you either believe in God and must accept Young Earth Creationism or you believe in Evolution and Science and are therefore aligning yourself with Atheism. That is an unfair ultimatum.

I feel the need to state unequivocally, that in this congregation you can be a faithful Christian, a lover of scripture and a devoted follower of Jesus and still believe in empirical science. You will never be asked to check your brain at the door to be a part of this church. Loving God and trusting evidence based science, do not need to be mutually exclusive. If it is true, it is of God.

The reason that I feel it is so important for me to say that this morning is because it has not always been my experience with church. This issue, for me is a personal one. This issue more than any other is what almost caused me to walk away from my faith when I was younger. Growing up, I largely accepted much of what was taught to me in church including creationism as a child and young teen, but I remember when I was older we had a lesson in Sunday school about the debate between Evolution and Creation. In this lesson, it was made clear to me that Evolution was a hoax. And any failure of mine to not believe in a literal creation account reflected a lack of faith. This was heavy, much tougher than I would have thought, I knew I could not accept such beliefs in the face of such obvious and overwhelming evidence. I was frustrated and felt that I was being lied to, which only made me start to question other things about my faith, what other lies were being told, what other shoe was going to drop. If I did not have supportive family and other Christian friends who

12 believed in evolution, I may have just walked away. Fortunately, I was able to grow in my faith in supportive communities like at Camp and when I was in College at La Verne.

I share this because I know how confusing it can feel to have something you believe in just disappear. It can feel like the floor just drops out from under you. Fortunately for me, my understanding of God and Jesus was not wrapped up in fundamentalism and biblical literalism. There are however, many people whose faith is built like a house of cards that requires constant and vigilant protection. I have often heard it said that “well if you don’t believe in (fill in the blank), than you might as well just throw out your faith because than nothing must be true.” For many Young Earth Creationists, they passionately defend their beliefs ignoring or dismissing mounting scientific evidence, performing mental gymnastics and contorting facts because the alternative risks pulling out a card that might cause their entire house of faith to fall apart. In this way, I can be sympathetic to their position, maybe even respect their fortitude. Not only must it be exhausting to constantly hold this kind of apologetic posture, but it is unnecessary. Not only do Young Earth Creationists carry an unnecessary burden of having to build their reality around a literal reading of Genesis 1, but may not fully appreciate the benefit that comes with reading these accounts symbolically.

I believe in God as Creator and can willingly admit that there remains a lot of mystery and confusion with how the universe came to be. But I am ok with that. I am not God and could never possibly fathom the complexities of time, space and physics that have brought about this reality that we share. I have no desire to cram God into a box with black and white lines so that I can be satisfied with my comprehension of the Divine. I do not seek to domesticate God in order to fit a specific reading of scripture. It is incredibly liberating and inspiring to worship a God that is mysterious, that cannot be confined, that provides questions to answers, that is bigger, greater and more beautiful than I can comprehend. The complexity of a universe unfurling itself over billions of years,

growing, adapting, evolving and changing is much more inspirational and impressive than a God who snapped his male fingers 6,000 years ago to create what we have today.

So today—as you contemplate the wonder of creation, remember that perhaps one of the most important and significant things is not about how it happened, but that it happened at all. There was no guarantee that existence was to happen. No promise of life, no assurance that Earth or even this universe was supposed to exist. The very act of creation, the very opportunity—to be—is a gift. We have all found ourselves here this morning in this place at this time. How beautiful that is, and how wonderful it is that we can go from this place into creation and appreciate that it was created and was called “Very Good.”

