

Systematic theology with a solid foundation

Biblical Doctrine: A systematic summary of Bible truth

John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue (Eds.)

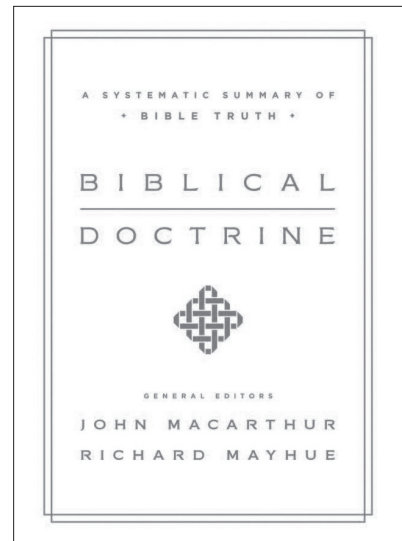
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Ever since the popularization of uniformitarian philosophy and evolutionary theorizing in the 19th century, many otherwise conservative theologians, biblical scholars, and church leaders have taken to reinterpreting Genesis to fit with the mainstream secular scientific paradigms for understanding the origins and history of the universe, the earth, and life itself.¹

Ideas of deep time and even molecules-to-man evolution have seeped their way into a great number of today's Bible commentaries and theology textbooks used in seminaries worldwide to train the Christian leaders of tomorrow.² It is, therefore, immensely refreshing to finally have a recent, well-written, scholarly systematic theology text that unashamedly holds to the biblical history of recent creation and the global flood.³

John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue's *Biblical Doctrine* covers a variety of key doctrines of historic Christian belief, though certainly, of course, with their own theological distinctives. Students of Scripture will greatly appreciate how saturated the text is with Scripture references, showing the text's effort to stay true to its name. It will also be appreciated that the authors do not shy away



from delving into some detailed discussion concerning issues related to Genesis 1–11 that are hotly debated even among biblical creationists, such as the nature of the transmission of Adam's sin to the rest of mankind (pp. 461–466) and the identities of the “sons of God” and the Nephilim in Genesis 6:1–4 (pp. 730–733). However, for the purpose of this review, we will focus on the book's more essential points made concerning the doctrine of creation without explicitly endorsing any other aspects of the authors' broader theology.

A solid foundation for theology

It is a distinctive feature that sets this volume apart from the rest in the long list of modern theological texts that it strongly affirms young-earth (biblical) creation and the fiat creation model in particular. The authors affirm all of its essential components, including but not limited to creation *ex nihilo* by divine decree or fiat over six literal 24-hour (solar) days (defended

most thoroughly on pp. 402–405); the categorization, reproducibility, and adaptability of living things within the confines of the originally created ‘kinds’; the climactic special creation and uniqueness of human beings made in the image of God; an age of the earth of thousands, not millions and billions, of years; and the reality and impact of a global, catastrophic flood (pp. 213–216).

MacArthur and Mayhue rightfully reject the evolutionary account of origins in favour of biblical creation, clearly recognizing both the flaws of the former and the foundational nature of the latter to other biblical doctrines. Such being the case, they affirm the historicity of Genesis 1–11, in whole or in part, throughout their text in various theological contexts, highlighting the foundational relevance of the creation-fall-flood-dispersion narrative to the rest of Scripture (figure 1).⁴ For the purposes of this review, a few points deserve special mention, particularly concerning the authors’ treatment of anthropology, hamartiology, soteriology, and eschatology.

Anthropology

On the creation of mankind in particular, the authors deny that humans are part of the animal kingdom and are descended from ape-like ancestors. Instead, they affirm that the first man, Adam, was literally created from the dust of the earth, that the first woman, Eve, was created from one of his ribs, and that both they and all their descendants were created in the image of God—just as the Bible says (see especially pp. 405–414).

Taking a straightforward approach to Genesis 1–2, they affirm that “God created man not from other beings over eons of time but from the ground on the literal sixth day of creation” (p. 214). All other human beings are descended from Adam and Eve, then from Noah and his family, and then, finally, from the peoples who

dispersed from the Tower of Babel. These collectively had all the genetic potential for the ethnic diversity witnessed within mankind up to today (pp. 439–440).

The authors recognize the non-triviality of human origins in relation to the other teachings of Scripture when they affirm that the historical Adam

“... is foundational for understanding the origin and history of the human race, the nature of humanity, the origin of sin, the beginning of human and animal death, the need for salvation, the basis for historical events in Genesis, the reason for functional order within the church, and even the future existence of mankind” (p. 407).

If we deny the historicity of the opening chapters of Genesis (and, thus, of the Bible), the removal of this historical bedrock of other events in Scripture leaves other Christian doctrines with much to be desired.

Such is the case when it comes to the Gospel—the central message of the Christian faith. MacArthur and Mayhue recognize and rightfully emphasize that the biblical doctrines of sin and salvation only make sense within the context of the historical account of creation and the Fall found in Genesis.

Hamartiology

Drawing from the Genesis creation account, MacArthur and Mayhue affirm that the original creation was “very good” and therefore did not include corruption or death. Rather, these are consequences of sin, which only entered the world when the first man, Adam, sinned (pp. 457, 836–837). They therefore recognize the inherent incoherence of attempts at integrating evolutionary theory with Scripture: “Evolution of the world is ruled out by this assertion [that the original creation was ‘very good’] since evolution *requires decay and death*” (p. 215). Evolutionary theory



Figure 1. Genesis is foundational to the rest of Christian doctrine, including the Gospel itself.

entails millions and billions of years of pain, suffering, and death before humans even entered the scene.

But how could God call his creation “very good” *after* the creation of mankind if the world was already plagued with all these very *bad* things? Scripture explicitly refers to death as an *enemy* to be destroyed (1 Corinthians 15:26), and part of the Christian hope is that we will one day be freed from all pain and suffering (Revelation 21:4). Thus, a consistent hermeneutic would have pain, suffering, and death introduced *after* God declared his creation “very good.” As Scripture teaches, and as MacArthur and Mayhue rightly affirm, death, along with pain and suffering, is “an intrusion into God’s creation” introduced by Adam’s sin and persisting due to the sin of his descendants (p. 435).

Soteriology

In addition to evolutionary theory’s incompatibility with the biblical doctrine of sin, MacArthur and Mayhue also point out that an evolutionary account of origins undermines Christ’s salvific work on the cross. Not only can the evolutionary theory of origins not account for man’s uniqueness, man’s infection by sin, and Christ’s role as *kinsman* redeemer (pp. 403–404), but its denial of the original human pair—Adam and Eve—completely undermines the Gospel message.

The authors rightly note the foundational role the historical “first man, Adam”, and his work plays in the historical “last Adam” (Jesus Christ) and *his* work (1 Corinthians 15:45). For just as sin and death came through the first federal head, Adam, salvation and life come through the second federal head, Christ. The work of the last Adam begins the *reversal* of the work of the first Adam. Commenting on the Apostle Paul’s comparisons between Adam and Christ in these regards, MacArthur and Mayhue conclude:

“If Adam is not a person, then the comparison collapses, including Jesus’ role as the One who represents mankind as Saviour. Rejecting the historicity of Adam truly undermines the Gospel itself” (p. 406).

Thus, the authors clearly highlight the non-triviality of the creation-evolution issue by demonstrating its relevance to the Gospel message itself, and thereby further demonstrating why ministries like CMI exist.

Eschatology

Not only is the history of Genesis foundational to understanding the salvation of mankind, but it is also crucial for grasping the future redemption of *all* of creation. As MacArthur and Mayhue put it: “If one grasps God’s original purposes for man and the creation, then one is in a better position to grasp what is still to come” (p. 832). As they explain further, the Genesis record of an originally “very good” creation that subsequently succumbed to the curse of sin and death leaves us with the eschatological hope or expectation of a new creation freed from the curse of sin and death and restored and regenerated to a “very good” (i.e. perfect) state.

The new creation is the very reversal of what became of the old creation as a result of the Fall and is thus “the actual, thrilling conclusion to a really great story” that began in Genesis (p. 913). The saga of Genesis to Revelation explains the beginning and anticipates the end of the establishment of the kingdom of God (pp. 851–856). As such, it is impossible to fully appreciate God’s revealed truth about the end without first gaining a proper understanding of His revealed truth about the beginning.

Points of contention

Despite a strong affirmation of the various features of biblical creationism and an overall solid treatment of hermeneutical and theological issues

related to the YEC position and the relevant biblical texts, I have several points of contention with the authors.

The maximum possible age of the earth

The authors rightly reject the notions of deep time and “the uniformitarian naturalism of secular scientists” (p. 286) in favour of a relatively recent creation date. However, they mistakenly follow a common view among a number of biblical creationists two or more decades ago, that the Bible allows for the earth and universe to be as old as 10,000 years or more: “The earth is relatively young—*perhaps* less than ten thousand years old [emphasis added]” (p. 216).

However, upon a careful examination of the biblical data (e.g. chronogenealogies, textual variants, etc.), it is clear that Scripture leaves no room for an age of creation of 10,000 years or more. In fact, no matter which textual assumptions are granted for dating certain events and deciding which manuscripts are more reliable, the date of creation only falls in the range of somewhere between 5,665 and 3,822 BC, thus yielding a maximum possible creation date of ~7,700 years ago.⁵ Therefore, it would have been more appropriate for MacArthur and Mayhue to state that the earth is *definitely* less than 10,000 years old.

Creation with the appearance of age?

Another point of contention requires a little background knowledge. The two distinctly YEC models for interpreting the Genesis creation account—and the relevant scientific data—are the fiat creation model and the apparent age theory. Both models affirm the basic precepts of young-earth creationism. However, the apparent age theory postulates that God created everything with the appearance of age so much so that the earth and universe *look* or *appear to be*

millions and billions of years old while in reality only being thousands of years old, while the fiat creation model says that God created everything not with the appearance of age but with *functional maturity* so that trees were created already bearing fruit, and Adam and Eve were created with the physiological maturity to reproduce. But some major differences would include absence of navels in the first couple and no growth rings in the trees. Both of these would have no function, but instead would do nothing but point to a history that never happened: Adam and Eve being attached to mothers, and trees having seasonal growing cycles.

MacArthur and Mayhue rightly affirm “the fiat creationist model as the proper interpretation of the biblical creation narrative” (p. 213). However, the authors confuse fiat creationism with the fallacious apparent age theory, wrongly thinking the two are one and the same: “God created all things *mature*, with the *appearance of age* [emphasis added]” (p. 215). However, as was just explained, the two models are inherently *not* the same. The apparent age theory makes God out to be a deceiver, purposely making things look much, much older than they really are, and having a history they never had, without disclosing this information to observers—and he *does* intend that we make *accurate* scientific observations.

The fiat creation model, on the other hand, points out that age has no appearance but is an *interpretation* of the data that relies on assumptions that, depending on the case, are not always true.⁶ The authors certainly do not believe that God is a deceiver, but if they want to be consistent, then they must clearly distinguish between the ideas of God’s original creation being made with *functional maturity* versus it being made with the *appearance of age*, and accept the former proposition while rejecting the latter.

Science vs scripture?

On the relationship between science and Scripture as it pertains to the Genesis creation account, the authors, expressing their disappointment that so many believers reject Genesis as history, make this peculiar statement: “Even many Christians seriously question the biblical record and strongly prefer *scientific conclusions over the testimony of Scripture* [emphasis added]” (p. 402).

While the context of the passage makes it clear that what the authors mean here by “scientific conclusions” are the ideas of evolution and deep time, their phrasing of this sentence gives the impression of framing the issue within the classic conflict thesis, creating a false dichotomy of science versus Scripture/Christianity. This is certainly not the authors’ intention and the verbiage used is most likely a slip-up on their part.⁷

However, it is, for the sake of clarity, still worth taking a moment to address this issue simply by pointing out that what are at odds in the creation-evolution debate are not science and Scripture but two different accounts of history (i.e. biblical versus secular) and their respective interpretations of the relevant scientific data, each of which is built on presuppositions about the past (e.g. catastrophism versus uniformitarianism).

Thus, it would have been more appropriate for MacArthur and Mayhue to frame the issue not as one of Christians rejecting the biblical record of origins in favour of “scientific conclusions”, but rather as one of Christians accepting the secular account of history over the biblical account of history. This leads to reinterpretations of Genesis that do harm to the text and Christian theology, as the authors made especially clear in their discussions on anthropology, hamartiology, soteriology, and eschatology.

Final assessment

The YEC position not only undergoes intellectual persecution in the scientific community but is becoming less acceptable and tolerable among the elite of the theological and biblical studies communities as well. It is therefore both refreshing and admirable to find MacArthur and Mayhue’s *Biblical Doctrine* taking such an unashamed stance on and defending the soundness and importance of biblical creation. As with any theology text, it is rare for someone to agree with all of an author’s theological persuasions. The same will certainly hold true for this one. Concerning the topic of creation in particular, however, the authors gave an overall sound presentation of the biblical data and theological reasoning behind biblical creation to the satisfaction of any biblical creationist. Though there are a few shortcomings, these are relatively minor. All in all, *Biblical Doctrine* is an excellent and essential resource for the biblical creationist’s library.

References

1. The question of the age of creation does not appear to have been at the forefront of the minds of most Christian writers throughout the first 1,800 years of church history, with the exception of the first few centuries. (Writers in the earlier church period gave greater focus to the date of creation and subsequent chronology as they sought to counter Greek views of deep time and even the eternality and non-contingency of the cosmos. See Richet, P., The creation of the world and the birth of chronology, *Comptes Rendus Geoscience* 349(5):226–232, 2017.) However, those who did broach the subject were unanimous in their understanding of Genesis as describing a special creation event having taken place relatively recently, usually dating it to no earlier than 6,000 BC, with the notable exception of Origen, who dated creation at <10,000 BC. For a brief survey of the history of the interpretation of the Genesis creation narrative (with citations of primary sources), see Sarfati, J., *Refuting Compromise: A biblical and scientific refutation of ‘progressive creationism’ (billions of years) as popularized by astronomer Hugh Ross*, 2nd edn, Creation Book Publishers, Powder Springs, GA, pp. 105–137, 2011.
2. Mortenson, T., Systematic theology texts and the age of the earth: a response to the views of Erickson, Grudem, and Lewis and Demarest, *ARJ* 2:175–200, 2009.
3. MacArthur and Mayhue themselves recognize this as a distinctive feature of their volume on p. 26.

4. Cf. Sarfati, J.D., *The Genesis Account: A theological, historical, and scientific commentary on Genesis 1–11*, Creation Book Publishers, Powder Springs, GA, pp. 69–86, 2015, wherein the author explains the foundational nature of Genesis 1–11 to the doctrines of bibliology, theology proper, Christology, pneumatology, angelology proper, satanology, demonology, anthropology, hamartiology, soteriology, Israelology, ecclesiology, and eschatology. MacArthur and Mayhue’s recognition of the importance of Genesis to biblical Christianity is not surprising as they have discussed and defended it elsewhere. See, for example, MacArthur, J., *The Battle for the Beginning: Creation, evolution, and the Bible*, Thomas Nelson, Nashville, TN, 2001; Mayhue, R., Editorial: scripture on creation, *The Master’s Seminary J.* **23**(1):1–6, 2012.
5. Hardy, C., and Carter, R., The biblical minimum and maximum age of the earth, *J. Creation* **28**(2):89–96, 2014.
6. Sarfati, ref. 4, pp. 173–177; cf. Wieland, C., The earth: how old does it look? *Creation* **23**(1):8–13, 2000.
7. This is evident from their statement concerning the scientific accuracy of Scripture, *contra* the accommodation theory of inspiration: “If God is able to keep the writers free from error at all, such as in writing spiritual truths, then there are no reasonable grounds to conclude that he was unable to secure a factual account of *scientific* and historical records [emphasis added]” (p. 108). They also recommend other resources that *do* argue for the compatibility of science and Scripture, such as 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, 2008 (recommended in a footnote on p. 405).