

Did Jesus Teach that the Earth is Young?

Mark 10:6 (ESV)

⁶ But from the beginning of creation, ‘God made them male and female.’

Mark 10:6 (NA27)

ἅ ἀπὸ δὲ ἀρχῆς κτίσεως ἄρσεν καὶ θῆλυ ἐποίησεν αὐτούς·

This verse, perhaps more than any other, is used by Young-Earth Creationists to say that Jesus taught that the earth is young (i.e. thousands, not billions of years). The implication is that if the Son of God, indeed the Creator of the world (Col. 1:15-17), thought the earth was young, there can certainly be no evidence to the contrary and the debate is over. For the Christian who believes that the Bible is the inerrant Word of God, this is most certainly true. If Jesus taught a young earth, then the earth *is* young...period. But is this really what Jesus meant here in Mark 10:6 or is there another interpretation?

In the Young-Earth publication *Coming to Grips with Genesis* (Terry Mortenson & Thane Ury, Eds. (2008)), an entire chapter is devoted to ‘Jesus’ view of the age of the earth’ (pp. 315-346). Terry Mortenson, with the Young-Earth ministry *Answers in Genesis*, comments that Mark 10:6 is one of the key passages in which Jesus teaches a young earth (p. 318). He even states that “we have strong grounds to conclude that He believed in a literal six-day creation week which occurred only a few thousand years ago (p. 325).” We will now look at this passage in detail to see if Mortenson’s claims have any merit.

First, we must look at this verse in its context. Jesus had just left Capernaum (Mark 9:33) and traveled to the region of Judea (10:1). Some Pharisees came to Him to test Him asking “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife (10:2)?” Jesus then asks them what was written in the Law of Moses (10:3). The Pharisees replied that Moses permitted divorce with a certificate, and then the man could send his wife away (10:4 taken from Deut 24:1-4). At this, Jesus replies that it was only because of the hardness of their hearts that he wrote that (10:5), but that “from the beginning of Creation God made them male and female [a quote of Gen. 1:27]. Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh [a quote of Gen. 2:24].’ So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate (10:6-9).”

Jesus clearly condemned divorce in this pericope, but did He also allude to the age of the earth as Mortenson and other YECs claim? The phrase used here is, from the beginning of Creation (Gr. *ap’ arches ktiseos*). This prepositional phrase acts as an adjunct to the primary clause He made them male and female. [In the parallel verse, Matt. 19:4, Matthew only records Jesus saying from the beginning (Gr. *ap’ arches*). The word creation is not used in this passage.] The question then becomes, “does this refer to 1) the beginning of all of Creation, 2) the beginning of the creation of mankind, or 3) the entire Creation Week (Gen. 1)?” The majority of YECs would believe either the first or the third explanation. Mortenson supports the view that this refers to the entire Creation

Week (p.320) and states that this proves Jesus places the creation of mankind temporally near the creation of the universe (p. 342).

To answer this question, we need to examine the words individually and the phrase as a whole. The word *arche* (beginning) is used 55 times in the NT. In 19 of those occurrences it is used with the preposition *apo* (from). According to TDNT, the term *arche*, “in its temporal significance, it denotes beginning in the exact sense, i.e., the place in a temporal sequence at which something new, which is also finite, commences.” Again regarding its NT usage, TDNT states that “it simply denotes the first point of time according to the context.” The LXX uses *arche* often for the Hebrew term *rosh* which is employed in Genesis 1:1 (in the beginning). Clearly, this first verse of the Bible speaks of the beginning of all things, but it encompasses a time from the absolute Creation event until God spoke in Genesis 1:3 when the earth was already formed. It is unclear biblically how long the events of Genesis 1:1-2 took to transpire, but scientists estimate this took about 9 billion years. Other uses in the LXX such as Jer. 28:1 indicate that the *arche* is not an instantaneous moment in time, for in the case of the reign of Zedekiah it comprised a period of four years and five months. These uses of *arche* which speak of vague indefinite periods of time towards the early stages of an event would seem to lend credence to Mortenson’s interpretation of the ‘beginning of Creation’ meaning the entire Creation Week, but they cannot rule out the first or second interpretation listed above.

The exact phrase *ap’ arches ktiseos* (from the beginning of Creation) is used two other times in the NT (Mark 13:19 and 2Pet. 3:4). In Mark 13 we see Jesus delivering the Olivet Discourse. In verse 19 He describes such a time of tribulation that “has not been from the beginning of Creation that God created until now, and never will be.” Since the tribulation period is one that deals primarily with human suffering, we know that “the beginning of Creation” in this instance only deals with the time since humans were on the earth. In 2Pet. 3:4 we see the Apostle teaching that many will scoff in the last days, saying that the Lord will not come back to judge them. Peter says that these sinful people deliberately forget that God’s judgment most definitely happened in the past when the world of Noah’s day was destroyed the Great Flood (speaking of the world of humanity, not the natural world, since it obviously still exists and was not re-created after the Flood) (2Pet. 3:5-6). The same judgment (though with fire) awaits present-day scoffers who say Jesus’ judgment will not happen. Though the Flood is mentioned, the purpose of this pericope in Peter is to tell of the certainty of judgment on the ungodly (2Pet. 3:7).

Mortenson, in his commentary, is very adamant that these two other uses clearly refer to the beginning of the cosmos and not merely the beginning of mankind (pp. 319-322). Although he acknowledges that in Mark 13:19 the tribulation is referring to human suffering, he still falls back on his premise that this means humans were created near the beginning of the cosmos rather than billions of years later. He also states that in 2Pet. 3:4, the subject is the cosmos and not humanity, but the timeline in that verse starts when “the fathers fell asleep”, NOT at or near the creation event. So, despite Mortenson’s claims, we find both of these other occurrences of our phrase clearly describing human activity. Never do they refer or allude to the events of the beginning of Gen. 1:1-2 or the first five Creation Days of Gen. 1.

So then, let us consider Jesus' statement in Mark 10:6 in context to determine the best interpretation. I believe we can effectively rule out the first interpretation given above. This verse is not looking back to the instantaneous moment of Creation (Gen. 1:1). If it was, then Jesus is mistaken because man (the subject of the verse in context) was not created until Creation Day 6. It is not enough to say that the six 24-hour days are close enough to the beginning. That interpretation is as wrong as it would be if the Days were longer, say billions of years. The only way this interpretation would work is in an ideological sense where at the moment of Creation in Gen. 1:1 God had the idea that man and woman should not divorce. This would then be similar to God's foreknowledge in choosing us before the foundation of the world in Eph. 1:4. This interpretation would fit, but it is improvable, and possibly not the best one.

So what about the third interpretation above where the phrase "the beginning of Creation" refers to the whole Creation Week? We have already seen how *arche* (beginning) can refer to an undefined period of time early on in a timeline (remember the beginning of Zedekiah's reign still going on in his fourth year as king in Jer. 28:1?) This alone makes this interpretation feasible here in Mark 10:6. Mortenson, then, seems justified in his interpretation, but his implications are unwarranted if not deceptive. He states that "Jesus taught that Adam was at the beginning of Creation (p. 342)." And that according to the Old-Earth Creationist time scale, "man came into existence at the *very tail end* of creation to-date (p.342)." These two statements are contradictory in that in both YEC and OEC thinking man was created on Creation Day 6 (Gen. 1:26-27). Only the length of the Day (Heb. *yom*) differs between the two camps. The implications are clear that if "the beginning of Creation" refers to the entire Creation Week, it matters not how long the Days were. Adam would still have been created in "the beginning of Creation" either way. While this interpretation would seem feasible, there may be another that fits the context better.

If you remember, the context of Mark 10:6 is not a discussion about Creation or the natural world at all. It is part of a dialogue between Jesus and the Pharisees on whether it is permissible to get a divorce. The subjects of the conversation then are clearly humans, and Jesus is referring to the time when God created them (Gen. 1:26-27), and then instituted the marriage covenant (Gen. 2:24). The beginning Jesus is referring to is the beginning of mankind. From this beginning, God ordained that a man and woman should get married and be joined together, and what God has joined, let not man separate (Mark 10:7-9).

While this has been taken as a reference to the creation of the natural world, this does not fit the context, nor does it make sense in the light of the other uses of the phrase "the beginning of Creation (Mark 13:19; 2Pet. 3:4)" or the parallel passage in Matt. 19:4-6. Rather, this is a warning about taking seriously the covenants and institutions of our Creator.

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