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A Case Study: The Creationism of Hugh Ross and Reasons to Believe

by Patrick Winkler

Explanations of observations in this world and their relationship to Scripture result in a wide variety of conclusions and assertions, both theological and scientific. It is important for those who have an interest in creationism to understand not only *what* is said, but especially *why* it is said. This is true whether one is reviewing material from old earth **1** creationist sources, young earth **2** creationist sources, or, for that matter, naturalistic (atheistic) evolutionary **3** literature. For it is only then that the creationist is able properly to assess whether or not Scripture speaks about the issue.

1. Generally, old earth creationism holds that God created the universe “over six long periods of time – ages or epochs that encompass thousands or millions of years” and is an attempt to harmonize assertions that the earth is scientifically measurably old with the creation account in Genesis. Hugh Ross, A Matter of Days: Resolving A Creation Controversy (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2004) 11.

2 Generally, young earth creationism holds that God created the universe some thousands of years ago. Many, therefore, conclude that the earth will be scientifically measurably young. It also requires the six days of creation to be 24-hour periods.

3 Generally, that the universe, earth and all life came to be by unguided, non-supernatural means over a long period of time.

This paper is the first in a series of articles on the creationism of Hugh Ross and Reasons to Believe (hereafter, referred to as RTB). **4** This paper is meant to give the reader a broad overview of some of the more significant claims of Hugh Ross and RTB. **5** As we proceed, the reader should understand that, due to space limitations of this paper, many details will be omitted. The *hows* and *whys* will be left to future papers where we will have room to deal with the particulars of some of his arguments more thoroughly.

4. <http://www.reasons.org/> (accessed April 7, 2011). Reasons To Believe was founded by Ross in 1986.

5. Ross gives a more complete presentation of RTB’s position in the book More Than A Theory: Revealing A Testable Model for Creation (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2009).

In my previous paper **6** I outlined the method which I intend to follow for this series of papers. I intend to offer a distinctly confessional Lutheran assessment whenever applicable, as I believe that a distinctly confessional Lutheran approach is sorely lacking in the contemporary creationist movement. It is also my intent to strive, wherever possible, to keep Hugh Ross’ purely scientific assertions separate from his theological assertions, or, in the very least, to make this distinction obvious to the reader. I realize that his theological position can and does influence many of his scientific conclusions. However, in order to make appropriate Scriptural application, the creationist must always be aware of that which has its foundation in Scripture and that which does not. Those

assertions which do not have their foundations in Scripture may, therefore, be open to the application of Christian freedom either to be accepted or rejected on rational grounds. In such situations, individuals may in good conscience hold differing scientific opinions. Finally, it is my hope to portray Ross' and RTB's position accurately and in the proper context.

6. Patrick Winkler, *Essential Tools of a Creationist*, <http://www.lutheranscience.org>

A Day

One of the more well known characteristics of Ross and RTB's position is the interpretation of "yom" (Hebrew for "day"). Ross says that "young universe Christians claim that the Bible can *only* [emphasis his] be interpreted as teaching that all creation took place in six consecutive 24-hour days about 10,000 years ago. Old-universe Christians say the text allows ample room, with no compromise of biblical inerrancy, for creation days of longer duration and even for a cosmic origin date of just over 10 billion years ago." **7** Ross continues,

According to the Bible, God's unlimited power meant he could have chosen any time scale, short or long, to perform his creative work (see Isa. 40-48). Concerning the six 'days' of creation, the Hebrew allows for more than one literal interpretation. In Genesis 1, the word translated 'day,' yom, could have any of four different definitions: (1) a portion of the daylight hours, (2) the entire daylight segment of a twenty-four-hour day, (3) a twenty-four-hour day, and (4) a long but finite time period. **8**

7. Ross, *A Matter of Days*, 18.

8. Ross, *More Than A Theory: Revealing A Testable Model for Creation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2009), 83. This point on the definition of yom will be covered in detail in a future paper. Here Ross refers to the Brown-Driver-Briggs-Gesenius Lexicon (BDBG) as well as the *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (TWOT) definitions when making this argument. While it is true that the Hebrew word yom can denote different time durations in various Hebrew contexts, this **does not mean** that all definitions of yom might be open to an arbitrary length of time when used in the opening chapters of Genesis. It is necessary to look at the context in which yom occurs to determine whether such usage indicates a 24-hour period or otherwise.

Such a view, according to Ross, also offers a means by which the fossil record might be explained. **9**

One of the evidences RTB uses to show that "the universe cannot be very young [is] because most radioactive isotopes have decayed away." **10** However, I would emphasize that even though there may be scientific evidence which seems to support an old earth (or, as Don DeYoung describes, a mature earth **11**), that does not demand that we must interpret the Hebrew yom ("day") as a period longer than twenty-four hours. The Bible does not present God's creation as being inherently dependent upon when he created it. In other words, a creation which manifests age or maturity is not necessarily inconsistent with the biblical account of creation *per se*.

9. "If the Genesis 1 creation days are long time periods, the Bible offers an explanation of the fossil record enigma. It tells why so much animal speciation occurred before the creation of humans and why virtually no animal speciation has occurred since: after God created Adam and Eve, He stopped creating new life-forms." Ross, *A Matter of Days*, 129.

10. Ross, *A Matter of Days*, 157.

11. Don B. DeYoung, author of *Thousands ... not Billions: Challenging the Icon of Evolution: Questioning the Age of the Earth* (Green Forest, Arkansas: Master Books, 2005) has some very pertinent comments on this subject. In an ICC (International Conference on Creationism) paper, he writes, "In the 'mature' or 'fully functioning' creation view, one can speculate on the extent to which 'apparent age' details were imbedded into the fabric of creation. Would it be deceptive to instantly create daughter elements which normally arise over a long time period from radioactive parent nuclei? There is no definite answer to this question, since the Creation is described as fully functioning. For all we know, created details such as isotope abundances might be essential to the integrity and stability of the universe. One can only conclude that a mature creation is consistent with biblical data." DeYoung, *Extinct Isotopes and the Age of the Earth, Proceedings of the Sixth International Conference on Creationism* (Pittsburgh: Creation Science Fellowship and Dallas: Institute for Creation Research, 2008), 337.

Basis of the RTB Biblical Creation Model

In addition to a day-age interpretation of *yom*, there are other factors which RTB uses to construct their biblical creation model. One of these is that "the Bible teaches a dual, consistent revelation" because "the facts of nature and Scripture will always agree." **12** On this point, Ross adds, "there can be no contradiction between what He has made and what He has spoken through the inspired writers of Scripture. The testimony of both will always agree."**13** "No contradictions exist between the established record of nature and a plain reading of the biblical creation texts." **14** Referencing Psalm 19:1-4 and Romans 1:18-20, "The Bible ... declares that the record of nature is reliable and understandable."**15**

12. In this context, Ross also states that "the Bible, therefore, has a definite priority over the facts of nature and a unique authority as the sufficient standard for Christian doctrine." Ross, *A Matter of Days*, 89-90.

13. Ross, *A Matter of Days*, 211.

14. Ross, *A Matter of Days*, 237-238.

15. Ross, *A Matter of Days*, 60.

Ross, an astronomer and physicist by training as well as by profession, accepts an age of the universe in the billions of years. **16** Therefore, he concludes, God must have supernaturally created the universe at the Big Bang some billions of years ago and supernaturally intervened at various times since. Ross says that if the universe's age is younger than that, it would create a logical disconnect between the *real* age of the cosmos versus its *apparent* age. **17** Ross stipulates that a deceptive appearance of age would violate God's own stated character and purpose. **18**

Ross continues, "Advocates of the appearance-of-age view typically hold what may be termed a 'biblicist' perspective – belief that the Bible is the only reliable truth source about any subject" (i.e., from astronomy to zoology). "Biblicists claim the Bible must be interpreted 'literally' (by which they mean concretely), even if that interpretation contradicts observable facts of nature. ... Biblicism has sometimes been confused with the Protestant doctrine of *Sola Scriptura*, according to which the Bible is the supreme authoritative source of information on all subjects it addresses." **19**

16. <http://www.reasons.org/special-edition-tnrtrb-astronomers-assess-age-universe> (accessed April 5, 2011).

17. In citing the opinion of Gary North (Institute for Christian Economics), Ross concurs with North that "a cosmic creation date of only thousands of years implies, in some respect, that the universe is an illusion. Since

astronomers have sound reasons for concluding that the cosmos is real, they cannot reasonably adopt young-universe creationism." Ross, *A Matter of Days*, 36.

18. "To suggest that God artificially fixed the broadening and reddening of the light individually from 10 billion trillion stars and 100 billion galaxies is to imply intentional deceit on a vast scale. ... Such action would be contradictory to His revealed character and purpose and to His declaration that creation is a truthful witness." Ross, *A Matter of Days*, 163. The reader should be aware that I do not agree with Ross' conclusions here and intend to cover this subject more in depth at a later date.

19. Ross, *A Matter of Days*, 37. In his endnotes, Ross points out that "Sola Scriptura is the position held by Reasons To Believe." Ross, *A Matter of Days*, 259. Sola Scriptura means, literally, "Scripture alone."

From my perspective, RTB's subscription to Sola Scriptura (albeit from a Reformed theological viewpoint) makes it understandable to also find that they subscribe to biblical inerrancy in the sixty-six books of the Bible **20** as well as to the use of "sound exegetical techniques" and the "historical-grammatical method."**21** RTB holds that its model remains consistent with the creation tenets of the Reformation confessional statements of the Heidelberg Catechism, the Belgic Confession and the Westminster Confession of Faith.**22** The tendency of RTB toward the rationalism of Reformed theology comes to light with the tendency to rationalize miraculous events,**23** the inclination toward the reasonableness of the objects of faith, **24** as well as the tendency toward pre-millennialism. **25**

20. Ross, *More Than A Theory*, 60-61.

21. Fazale Rana with Hugh Ross, *Who was Adam? A Creation Model Approach To The Origin Of Man* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2005), 43; "Reasons To Believe [adheres] to the doctrinal statements of the National Association of Evangelicals and the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy" Hugh Ross, *The Genesis Question: Scientific Advances And The Accuracy Of Genesis* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2001), 239. The reader might be familiar with the fact that, in 1978, the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy (ICBI) produced the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy, in 1982, the Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics, and the Chicago Statement on Biblical Application in 1986. See http://www.alliancenet.org/partner/Article_Display_Page/0..PTID307086_CHID750054_CIID2094578.00.html (accessed April 7, 2011).

22. Ross, *More Than A Theory*, 59; Ross' source for The Westminster Confession of Faith is http://www.reformed.org/documents/wcf_with_proofs/index.html (last accessed April 3, 2011)

23. "If the Sun, Moon, stars, and presumably planets in the vicinity of Earth were dropped into place on the fourth creation day, the gravitational perturbations would have radically altered Earth and instantly destroyed all life." Ross, *A Matter of Days*, 77.

24. "The Bible claims that faith is based on reasonable evidence." Continuing the quotation, "All the Hebrew and Greek words in the Bible translated into English as 'faith' document the importance of belief – and action – being based on verifiable truth." Ross, *A Matter of Days*, 63. Here, Ross includes such examples as 1 Thess. 5:21, 1 John 4:1 and Acts 17:11. The application made by Ross is to ultimately come to a **consistent** agreement of information from both Scripture and nature. He points out that some "believe that by discrediting Genesis they can demonstrate a flawed Bible. This 'faulty creation message' is [then] used to discredit the deity of Christ, the inerrancy of Scripture, the sanctity of life, doctrines of heaven and hell, and so forth. **If the creation account is implausible, what basis remains to believe anything else the Bible declares?**" [emphasis mine] Ross, *A Matter of Days*, 17. This subject of dual revelation, as well as the related subjects of the roles of faith and reason, will be covered in a separate paper. In the meantime, however, the reader should observe with caution how reason here seems to be emphasized since scientific plausibility is purposed to verify Scripture.

25. "A common, though not universal doctrinal position among old-earth creationists is premillennialism." Ross, *A Matter of Days*, 265.

Existence of Death

With respect to the role of death, RTB says, the story of life, death, and new life is part of RTB's biblical model. It does not contradict New Testament statements about the kind of death that originated with Adam. Romans 5:12 clarifies this position: "Sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all have sinned." This death, introduced by Adam's sin, applies strictly to humans. The whole of Scripture confirms that only humans, among all life created on Earth, can (and do) sin. Therefore this "death through sin" applies to humans alone, not to plants and animals. In addition, the passage states specifically that this "death came to all men." It does not say "to all creation" or "to all creatures." The verses make no apparent reference to plant or animal life, nor do other parallel passages (see 1 Cor. 15:20-23). **26**

This role of death seems to be, at least in part, a way for RTB to deal with the problem of evil in the world. **27**

26. Ross, *More Than A Theory*, 85

27. "God has the capacity right now to reduce human suffering. But a loving, merciful God allows people ... to suffer discomfort, illness, injury, and death. Can it be that God has good purposes for what seem like bad things? Could Earth's long history of plant and animal death have been part of God's good preparation for humanity and human civilization, technology, and the efficient spreading of the gospel?" Ross, *A Matter of Days*, 134-135.

Origin of Humanity

With RTB's position that death was preparative over much of Earth's history, one might have questions about RTB's explanation of fossilized remains of bipedal primates, for example, the Neanderthals, as well as the introduction of Adam and Eve into history.

RTB makes a distinction between pre-human bipedal primate species and humans. **28** Whereas pre-humans are animals, specially created by God, **29** humans are distinct in that they are God's crown of creation, supernaturally created and made in God's image. **30**

The reader should also be aware that, if Neanderthals and modern humans are two separate species, **31** any "pre-human" hominid genetic information found in the human genome might be interpreted by RTB as being the result of interbreeding between species (i.e., bestiality) as Todd C. Wood **32** points out. **33**

What was the purpose of such pre-human bipedal primate species? According to RTB, It seems reasonable that God anticipated the negative impact of (post-Fall) human activity on birds and mammals. One possible scenario is that in the time period prior to Adam and Eve's creation God made a sequence of bipedal primate species, each more skillful at hunting than the one before. Birds and mammals would then have developed better behavioral defenses against the future onslaught of humanity. God may have had other reasons as well for creating bipedal primates, reasons scientists are as yet incapable of discerning. **34**

28. "Neanderthals represent a pre-human primate species." Ross, *A Matter of Days*, 225; "A note on nomenclature: In modern evolutionary biology, humans are classified as 'hominids.' This book uses that term to refer only to the

bipedal primates that preceded 'modern humans.' ...neither the authors [Rana and Ross] nor RTB believes that hominids prior to modern humans should be called human beings." Rana with Ross, *Who was Adam?* 29; "RTB's biblical creation model considers the hominids found in the fossil record to be animals created by God's direct intervention for His purposes. . . . While the hominids were created by God's command, they were not spiritual beings made in His image. This status was reserved for human beings." Rana with Ross, *Who was Adam?* 50; "Homo sapiens idaltu (like H. erectus, Neanderthals, and other archaic Homo sapiens) were simply primates – animals that walked upright, possessed limited intelligence, and had some type of culture, but animals nonetheless." Rana with Ross, *Who was Adam?* 83; The RTB model "identifies these [Neanderthal] hominids as created by God – with some similarities to human beings and yet distinct." Rana with Ross, *Who was Adam?* 191.

29. Ross points out, "theistic evolution seems to contradict Genesis 1 and 2 as well as Mark 10:6 and Matthew 19:4. . . . These and other Bible passages indicate that God created the original human pair in a special, direct, and personal way. Thus RTB's model for humanity's origin must reject any form of theistic evolution that doesn't posit God's direct involvement. The RTB model asserts that attempts to establish evolutionary relationship among the hominids in the fossil record and to identify the evolutionary pathways to modern humans will ultimately prove unfruitful." Rana with Ross, *Who was Adam?* 44; "Several positions, including the day-age interpretation adopted in this book, treat the biblical creation accounts as reliable (though not exhaustive) descriptions of Earth's and life's natural history. According to the day-age approach, the Creator repeatedly intervened in Earth's history, initiating new life-forms, including humans." Rana with Ross, *Who was Adam?* 42.

30. "...only human beings were made in God's image" Rana with Ross, *Who was Adam?* 48.

31. "In other words, humans could not possibly be descended from Neanderthals." Ross, *A Matter of Days*, 225.

32. Todd C. Wood, PhD is a young earth creationist with a background in biochemistry and genomics. Personally, I often appreciate his viewpoint and started following his blog after I ran across the following blog entry: <http://toddcwood.blogspot.com/2009/09/truth-about-evolution.html> (last accessed, April 4, 2011).

33. <http://toddcwood.blogspot.com/2010/04/neandertals-bred-with-humans.html>
<http://toddcwood.blogspot.com/2010/05/neandertals-in-bizarro-world.html>
<http://toddcwood.blogspot.com/2010/05/neandertal-non-sequitur.html>
<http://toddcwood.blogspot.com/2010/05/pondering-image-of-god.html> and a related post
<http://toddcwood.blogspot.com/2011/01/human-species.html>. Todd Wood also offers an interesting multi-part assessment of RTB's human/chimp genome comparison which he finishes here
<http://toddcwood.blogspot.com/2011/01/rtb-and-chimp-genome-part-8.html> (last accessed, April 22, 2011)

34. Ross, *A Matter of Days*, 237.

Finally, RTB continues with their day-age assertions in determining when Adam and Eve were created by God **35** and conclude from the fossil record that Adam and Eve were created approximately 50,000 years ago. **36**

35. "...precisely dating the creation of Adam and Eve from the biblical text is not possible. Gaps in the genealogies and the ambiguity of key words in the original Hebrew text render the best attempts at a biblical date for Adam and Eve as estimates only. If few gaps exist, the date calculates to around 10,000 years ago. If many gaps occur, the date falls closer to 100,000 years ago." Rana with Ross, *Who was Adam?* 45.

36. Ross, *More Than A Theory*, 59.

A Universal Flood

Another aspect of RTB's creation model lies in the interpretation of the flood described in Genesis chapters 6-9:

All human beings and the "soulish" animals (birds and mammals) they came into contact with were destroyed by his flood – except for Noah, his three sons, and their wives. Contrary to popular perception of

the Genesis Flood account, RTB's model for human origins posits that the Flood was geographically limited (confined to the environs of Mesopotamia), not global. Still, the RTB model considers the extent of the Flood to be "universal" in that all humanity was impacted by it. **37**

This is because their model is required to be both a "biblically consistent and scientifically plausible interpretation of the Flood account." **38** In other words, RTB's interpretation of the flood is a conclusion based upon, and a result of, RTB's adherence to a dual, consistent revelation between nature and Scripture which I spoke of earlier in this paper.

In addition, the reader should also distinguish between *universal* and *global*. *Global* would imply that the flood covered the entire planet, something which the RTB model deems to be scientifically implausible. Whereas *universal* implies that "the Flood event described in Genesis 6-9 did, indeed, accomplish the ends God clearly intended – and explicitly stated – without covering the entire planet." **39**

Although RTB appeals to a local universal flood, they still maintain the scientific plausibility of humans living hundreds of years prior to the Flood. "The Genesis 5 genealogy indicates that some of humanity's patriarchs to be several hundred years old. The RTB model maintains that these ages are to be taken literally. Genesis 6:3 records that God deplored humanity's rampant sinful behavior and intervened to shorten the maximum human life span from about 900 years to about 120 years." **40** "The RTB biblical creation model must accept the burden of proof by demonstrating that the long life spans recorded in Genesis are scientifically plausible." **41**

37. Rana with Ross, *Who was Adam?* 51.

38. Ross, *The Genesis Question*, 160.

39. *Ibid.*

40. Rana with Ross, *Who was Adam?* 50. My personal opinion is that it is likely that the words in Genesis 6:3 ("his days will be a hundred and twenty years" [NIV]) not only mark the time until the flood waters came upon the earth, but that these words also limit the maximum life span of human beings to 120 years. Nevertheless, it took time for this reduction of the maximum life span to reach 120 years. I find it highly correlative that the current scientific approximation for the maximum life span of human beings is, and has historically been, 120 years. Note that the definition of maximum life span is not the same as average life span, life expectancy or mortality rate.

41. Rana with Ross, *Who was Adam?* 112.

Some Final Comments

The reader should notice that, while RTB presents an old earth viewpoint, they present themselves as standing in opposition to a purely naturalistic (atheistic) evolutionary position. **42** The RTB creation model is one characterized by God's supernatural, intentionally designed and finely tuned **43** intervention.

Because chance governs biological evolution at its most fundamental level, repeated evolutionary events much result in dramatically different outcomes. ... The nature of the evolutionary process renders outcomes nonreproducible. ... Biological evolution must take place along a unique pathway each time, if and when it occurs. In other words, evolution cannot repeat." **44**

Finally, RTB makes a significant observation with which I agree. Christian creationists need to be reminded of this on occasion: "Although materialism is the reigning worldview in science,

Christians must realize that the scientific community's resistance to creation stems largely from the view that the biblical perspective represents a religion, not science."⁴⁵ This does not mean that God's creation is immeasurable or unquantifiable in a scientific way. What it does mean is that Christians interpret the world and see God's hand in the marvels of His creation from the presupposition of faith – something that is unquantifiable from a scientific point of view.

In future papers, we will take a closer look at some of the biblical assertions of RTB that we have mentioned here. LSI

42.. "A 14-billion-year-old universe is vastly too young for any conceivable natural-process scenario to yield, on its own, even the simplest living organism. Yet biologists and chemists have spent years building naturalistic models based on these inadequate boundary conditions." Ross, *A Matter of Days*, 121.

43. "No other characteristic of the universe is so well designed as this cosmic expansion." Ross, *A Matter of Days*, 139. "This observed stability indicates that the universe is expanding at a highly fine-tuned rate." Ross, *A Matter of Days*, 146. RTB spends a fair amount of time in their literature speaking about the anthropic principle, namely, that the physical aspects of our universe, including the seeming arbitrary values of physical constants (e.g. gravitational constant, strong nuclear force, etc), have all been finely tuned/determined. If any one of those constants would have been slightly different than its current value, life would not be possible.

44. Rana with Ross, *Who was Adam?* 23. Rana here is referring to Stephen Jay Gould's conclusion that, from an atheistic evolutionary perspective, humanity's arrival in evolutionary history is a "wildly improbable evolutionary event."

45. Rana with Ross, *Who was Adam?* 12.

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