

ARE THE FIRST ELEVEN CHAPTERS OF GENESIS HISTORICALLY ACCURATE?

By Richard Overman

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to your Bible History class. I would like to speak to you today on the question of the historical accuracy of the first eleven chapters of Genesis. I will present two different views on the subject, discuss the challenges to the historicity of Genesis 1-11, give you a historical perspective, present some current data, draw some conclusions, and give you some thoughts regarding your answer to this question.

On the one hand, Drs. John and Henry Morris state in their book, Scripture and Creation,

“Rather than outmoded folklore, as most critics allege, the creation chapters of Genesis are marvelous and accurate accounts of the actual events of the primeval history of the universe.”¹

On the other hand, Lawrence Boadt, in his book, Reading the Old Testament: An Introduction, disagrees. He states:

“Finally, in the days of King David’s new world empire, it seemed important to prepare a preface that would place God’s saving actions for Israel in the light of his care for the whole world. Thus, Genesis 1-11 began to take shape, and although it has the first place in the Bible, it is by no means the first part to be written.”²

These quotes represent divergent and mutually exclusive views on the historicity of the first 11 chapters of Genesis. The Morris’s believe they are quite accurate historically while Lawrence Boadt believes they are not historically accurate at all. How can we determine which is correct?

First, let’s look at reasons why people believe they are not accurate. There are two basic challenges to the historicity of the first 11 chapters of Genesis. They are the age of the earth and as a corollary, the global nature of the flood.

Why is the age of the earth a challenge to Genesis? A straightforward reading of genesis puts the time of creation about 6,000 to 10,000 years ago. The “conventional wisdom” among scientists today is that the earth is millions of years old. Hence, both cannot be true. Either the earth is young and Genesis is historically accurate or the earth is old and Genesis is not historically accurate.

As a corollary, the young earth/old earth issue revolves around the historical accuracy of the flood described in Genesis 7-9. The issue is how should the geologic record be interpreted. If the flood was global in nature, it is reasonable to interpret the geologic features of the earth from a young earth perspective. If the flood was not global, it may be reasonable to interpret geologic features from an old earth perspective. Therefore, the bulk of this presentation is on the interpretations of the geologic features. Specifically, we will see if there is any empirical data to show that the earth is millions of years old or that today’s geologic features can be explained by a global flood.

To understand the two positions on the age of the earth, we need to look at the historical perspective.³ Throughout most of the 1700’s, the scientific community accepted the Biblical position of a young earth. The study of geology focused on interpreting the geologic features

¹ “The Modern Creation Trilogy: Scripture & Creation”, Henry and John Morris, 1996, Master Books, Green Forrest AR, P. 13

² “Reading the Old Testament: An Introduction”, Lawrence Boadt, 1984, Paulist Press, NY, P. 110

³ For a more detailed discussion of this historical perspective see chapter 2 of “The Battle of Beginnings” by Del Ratzsch, InterVarsity Press, 1996

and record within the context of a global flood. In 1785, James Hutton proposed that flood geology was not appropriate. He maintained that appropriate geologic study can only refer to natural on-going processes at current strength and intensity. While Hutton's geologic views were struggling for acceptance, William Smith observed a progression in the fossil record and developed the technique of identifying particular strata by reference to index fossils. Also at this time, clergymen who were also geologists began to try to find ways to re-interpret the first chapter of genesis in order to account for long periods of time.

By 1830, Charles Lyell published his "Principals of Geology" where he showed that the geologic record can be reasonably interpreted using the assumption that the earth is millions of years old. It is noted that, at this point, there was no new data that required millions of years old earth assumptions. The same data that was previously interpreted and studied from a young earth perspective was simply re-interpreted using old earth assumptions.

By the late 1800's, Lord Kelvin provided calculations from physics that showed that the millions of years old earth assumptions cannot be valid. This sent shock waves through the geologic community and nearly put to rest the question of the age of the earth. If the earth was not old, it must be young and the historical accuracy of Genesis is validated. However, Henry Becquerel discovered the phenomenon of radioactivity in 1896 and radiometric-dating techniques were developed in the early 20th century. These techniques became the savior of old earth assumptions.

To summarize the historical perspective, because theologians compromised their interpretation of Genesis to fit in with the millions of year old earth assumptions, the old earth view became prevalent. Until radiometric dating was developed there was no data to validate the old earth assumptions. Empirical studies, in fact, argued against an old earth.

The question then becomes, has radiometric dating proven that the earth is millions of years old. Time will not permit a prolonged discussion so we will focus on the reliability of radiometric dating. Recent studies have been carried out on the Grand Canyon to evaluate the reliability of radiometric dating techniques.⁴ Samples were gathered from a lava flow at the top of the canyon and a lava flow lower in the canyon strata. Dating of the flows indicated that the upper flow ranged in age from 10,000 years to 2.6 billion years old. The lower flow gave indicated ages of 715 million years to 1.1 billion years old. Hence, the entire range of the lower flow was within the indicated range of the upper flow. If radiometric dating is reliable and consistent, the lower flow should have indicated ages much older than the upper flow. The data, however, shows that the upper flow gives indicated ages much older than the lower flow. Comparing the data from the same dating techniques, the potassium argon (K-Ar) model ages gave expected results. That is, the upper flow is indicated to be much younger than the lower flow. The rubidium strontium (Rb-Sr) model ages, however, gave results opposite than those expected. The upper flow gave indicated ages of 1.27 – 1.39 billion years old while the lower flow gave indicated ages of .98 - 1.1 billion years old. This and other current studies⁵ shows that it is reasonable to conclude that radiometric dating techniques are very unreliable and cannot be used to support assumptions that the earth is millions of years old.

The next question is, is there data to support the assumption that the geologic features of the earth can be formed by a global flood? To look at this question we will turn to the eruption of

⁴ For a more detailed discussion of these studies see chapter 5 of "The Young Earth" by John Morris, Master Books, 1994.

⁵ See the Proceedings of the Fourth International Conference on Creationism, Creation Science Fellowship, 1998.

Mt. St. Helens in 1980.⁶ One of the unique features of this eruption was that the eruption began with the north slope of the volcano sliding down the mountain which caused a steam blast. This steam blast traveled north toppling and charring thousands of acres of virgin forest in its path. When the north slope slid down the mountain, one quarter of it went into spirit lake and three quarters formed a plateau blocking off the North Fork of the Toutle River. When the rockslide hit Spirit Lake, it caused a tidal wave that scoured the opposing ridge of trees. The result was a one million log floating log mat in Spirit Lake.

The first geologic feature of interest is geologic strata. There were three significant eruptions of Mt. St. Helens. The lowest stratum was ash deposited during the May 18, 1980 eruption. The middle layer is ash that was deposited by hurricane force winds in the evening hours of June 12, 1980. The top layer is from a mudflow deposited during an eruption on March 19, 1982. While arguing for the old earth assumptions, William Smith suggested that “the violent forces of the flood shouldn’t have left things so nicely sorted.”⁷ From the layering at Mt. St. Helens, we see how catastrophic, violent, forces can leave things nicely sorted. More specifically, hurricane force winds left the middle layer of ash very finely sorted by size. If we did not know about the eruptions, we might suppose (as Hutton, Lyell, and Smith seemed to do) that each layer represents one year. This supposition would lead to the belief that the stratum was deposited over millions of years, but we know the supposition is incorrect.

During the eruptions of Mt. St. Helens, many canyons were formed. Two canyons of interest are the little Grand Canyon and Engineers Canyon. The little Grand Canyon is a 1/40th-scale model of the Grand Canyon in Arizona. It was formed by the mudflows in March, 1982. The mudflows cut through the plateau created when the north slope of the mountain slid down. There is documented evidence that it was not there one day and it was the next. Engineers Canyon was formed during the May 18, 1980 eruption. Notice the stream in the bottom of the canyon. One of Charles Lyell’s important arguments was that canyons are formed by river erosion over millions of years. In the case of Engineers Canyon, the stream did not form the canyon; the canyon formed the stream when it created a water shed.

Let us now take a quick look at petrified forests. Dr. Steve Austin proposed that petrified forests can be the result of floating log mats during a flood. This theory is that logs in the mat can float upright and fall down to the bottom of the water in a standing position. As sediment continues to fall, the log will become buried giving the impression that the tree grew there. As trees fall down at different times, the appearance of multiple forests growing over long periods of time can be generated. Recall that the tidal wave in Spirit Lake caused a one million-log floating log mat in Spirit Lake. Diving to the bottom of the lake, researchers found tens of thousands of trees standing on the bottom of the lake. They went to one and tried to move it but could not. A tree next to it could be moved. This shows that the trees fell down at different times and were buried to different levels. It was also noted that the roots of trees recently deposited ended abruptly about three feet from the trunk. Erosion around petrified trees in Yellowstone National Park shows that their roots also abruptly end about three feet from the trunk. A National Park Service sign gives the old earth interpretation of the petrified forests in Yellowstone National Park. It reads: “Across the valley rise the slopes of Specimen Ridge, but the forest you see there today is only the latest chapter in a remarkable story. Buried within the volcanic rocks that compose the mountain are twenty-seven distinct layers of fossil forests that flourished 50 million years ago.” After the data from Mt. St. Helens became known, the National Park Service removed the sign.

⁶ For more details and 35mm slides of the discussion see “Mount St. Helens: A Slide Collection for Educators” by Steve Austin, Geology Education Materials, 1991.

⁷ “The Battle of Beginnings”, p 18.

The last geologic feature we will look at is coal. Coal is layered in appearance and coal beds often contain sheets of bark. The standard old earth model for coal is that coal begins in a swamp. As organic material builds up in the swamp, a peat bog is created. If the peat bog is covered and put under high pressures and temperatures, it would turn to coal. This theory has been checked and found lacking. A swamp in Nova Scotia was drained and the peat bog examined. The peat bog had a coffee ground texture and had numerous roots running through it. If the peat bog is covered and put under high temperatures and pressure, it may turn to coal but will not look like the coal we find today. We do not find roots running through coal beds today. Ten months before Mt. St. Helens erupted, Dr. Steve Austin defended his Ph.D. Dissertation, which was a Floating Mat Model for the Origin of Coal. He proposed that flood conditions would cause floating log mats. As the logs rub together, the bark would rub off and a peat bog would be created below them. If the peat bog is covered over and put under high temperatures and pressure coal would be formed. Diving in Spirit Lake showed that there is a peat bog below the floating log mat that contains sheets of bark and no roots. If it is covered over and put under high pressures and temperatures, it will turn to coal and look like the coal that we see today.

We have seen that stratification, canyons, petrified forests, and coal can all be very easily explained within the context of a global flood. There is really no need to assume long periods of time.

Let's now return to the age of the earth as given by Genesis. Graphing the genealogies as they are written, Genesis indicates that creation occurred just over 6,000 years ago. Some claim that there are gaps in these genealogical records. Accounting for gaps, it is difficult to put the time of creation much more than 10,000 years ago, certainly not millions or billions of years ago.

In conclusion, we see that the genealogies in Genesis argue for a 6,000 to 10,000 year old earth. The idea that the earth is millions of years old is a philosophical position that enjoys no empirical support, the geological features from Mt. St. Helens show that global features could have been shaped by a global flood and that there is no need to re-interpret the data.

Finally, you will have to decide for yourself what you believe about the historical accuracy of the first 11 chapters of Genesis. I have given you the historical context and empirical facts with which to make that decision. Your textbooks present the alternative view from the one I have given you today. Whatever you decide, it is important that your decision is logically consistent. Therefore, I will leave you with these two thoughts. If you accept the historical accuracy of Genesis 1-11, you must accept that the earth is relatively young. If you accept that the earth is relatively old, you must reject the historical accuracy of Genesis 1-11.