

Traditional Adventist Creationism

ITS ORIGIN, DEVELOPMENT, AND CURRENT PROBLEMS

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From time to time I encounter questions about the traditional views of Seventh-day Adventists on creationism: what these views really are, how they have arisen, and how they are related to modern research in scientific fields, especially geology. In an attempt to answer some of these questions, and possibly to clarify some misapprehensions, I will review the situation as I have seen it develop, particularly during the past fifty years.

I

Seventh-day Adventists' views on creationism may be divided into two phases: the theological phase from 1850 to 1900, and the scientific phase from 1900 to the present. The issue today is whether science has had any influence on the theological aspects of creationism, and if so, what influence.

The first number of the *Review and Herald* has the following in an unsigned editorial: "The blessing and sanctifying of the seventh day is mentioned in connection with the first seventh day in the order of time. . . . The Sabbath was enjoined immediately after the close of the work of creation."¹

Again, four years later, came this comment: "He who observes . . . Jehovah's Rest-day . . . is in a special manner led to contemplate his six days' work of creation. And as he views the heavens above, and the earth beneath, and surveys the Creator's handy-works his mind is led upward to the living God."² So we see that the relation between Creation and the seventh-day Sabbath has always been a major point in Seventh-day Adventist theology.

The first statement I can find on the question of the origin of the species

came the year after the publication of Darwin's *Origin of Species*. G. W. Amadon wrote: "It is not necessary to suppose that each species now known was represented, for naturalists are generally of the opinion that their number has greatly increased from the influence of climate, food, intermixture of races, etc."³

About the same time, the question of geological interpretation was given attention: "Geology . . . is the great instrument which unbelievers are endeavoring to wield against the authority of the Scripture. . . . Certain formations . . . must have been ages on ages in reaching their present state; therefore the Mosaic record is not true. . . . The Bible is set aside, and infidelity triumphs."⁴

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The question of when the *substance* of the earth was created (at the beginning of Creation week or long before) arose early. Note this remark: "Nor is there anything in revelation which forbids us to believe that the substance of the earth was formed long before it received its present organization. The first verse of Genesis may relate to a period millions of ages prior to the events noticed in the rest of the chapter."⁵

Although it was admitted that the substance of the earth may have existed long before Creation week, no recognition was given to the theory that living creatures had been on the earth for long ages of time. In 1864 Ellen G. White wrote: "The first week, in which God performed the work of creation in six days and rested on the seventh day, was just like every other week."⁶ In a later work she expanded this point and made it still clearer: "When the Lord declares that He made the world in six days and rested on the seventh day, He means the day of twenty-four hours, which He has marked off by the rising and setting of the sun."⁷

An attempt to harmonize what some regard as a discrepancy in views was made in a long editorial in the *Review and Herald* in 1887. To quote word for word would be too extensive, but here are the main arguments: The Bible does not say that God *created* the heavens and the earth in six days. "*In the beginning* God created," but "in six days the Lord *made* the heavens and the earth." Here a separation is made between the creation of the substance and its organization in six days.⁸

In the *Signs of the Times* (1898), while Milton C. Wilcox was editor, these words appeared in an unsigned editorial: "When did God create, or bring into existence, the heavens and the earth? 'In the beginning.' . . . When this 'beginning' was, how long a period it covered, it is idle to conjecture; for it is not revealed. . . . On referring to the work in the beginning it is said, 'In the beginning God created'; but in referring to the six days'

work we read, 'In six days the Lord made.' Surely this is not accidental. Verse 1 refers to the *matter* of the earth; the six days' work to its formation."⁹

These statements seem to make a distinction between the time of creation of matter and the time of its formation, but those who believe that matter was brought into existence during the first moments of the six-day week find some support in statements by Ellen White: "In the formation of our world, God was not indebted to pre-existing matter."¹⁰ If, as we have seen in some of the foregoing statements, the formation was the six-day process, then we would infer from this quotation that matter had not been in existence previously. Another statement reads: "The Sabbath institution, which originated in Eden, is as old as the world itself."¹¹

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Some have suggested that perhaps the word *world* refers only to the inhabitants. On the other hand, in another place Ellen White speaks of the "sophistry in regard to the world's being created in an indefinite period of time,"¹² clearly a reference to the material substance, not to the population. A further problem arises in that she says in the reference cited earlier that the *formation* was not dependent on preexisting matter, whereas in another place she says that "in the creation of the earth, God was not dependent on preexisting matter." No distinction between the time of creation and the time of formation shows up in these two statements. Thus, it is difficult to build any positive argument on them.

The question of when the substance of the earth was brought into existence, however, is not the vital issue in traditional Adventist creationism. The real problem lies much deeper than that, as we shall see.

Ellen White rejected all ideas that the days of creation were anything but literal twenty-four-hour days. Adventists therefore refused to accept the "day-age theory" that was once popular in many churches. Mrs. White stated over and over again that there is no scriptural foundation for the theory of evolution, and her influence was a mighty factor in keeping the Seventh-day Adventist church in line with the literal creation record of Genesis. I need not quote extensively on these points, because they are familiar to every Adventist, and to attempt to include her many statements in this study would take too much space.

If these questions have not been of serious concern to Adventists (for all seem to have accepted the major principles with little or no difficulty), there was one phase of the theological period that has since become a rather perplexing one — although it did not seem to be much of a problem at the time. That is the question of the *time* of the six-day Creation week of the

first chapter of Genesis. Time has become an issue because certain age-dating methods and geological studies appear to indicate the necessity of allowing more time than the genealogies of Genesis five and eleven will allow.

In 1864, only five years after the appearance of Darwin's *Origin of Species* and while Darwinism was rapidly capturing the imagination of the scientific world, Ellen White wrote: "Creation week was only seven literal days, and . . . the world is now only about six thousand years old."¹³ This statement was followed in the next thirty-four years by thirty-six statements of like nature, or an average of one a year.¹⁴ Of these, eighteen speak of six thousand years, about six thousand, or nearly six thousand; fourteen speak of about four thousand years between Creation and Christ; and the others are miscellaneous references implying the same time lapse.

The question naturally arises: What was Ellen White shown? Was she shown the *figure* 6,000, or was she simply shown the sequence of events from Creation onward, and left to make her own conclusions regarding the time? Inasmuch as Ussher's chronology was printed in the Bible at the time she wrote, it is natural to assume that Mrs. White accepted it. But what is the truth on this point? Probably we shall never know. Conservative Adventists argue that she would not have repeated these figures so many times if they were not correct. Of course, they admit, six thousand is a round number that allows a certain degree of flexibility. Yet, in four places¹⁵ she uses the expression "nearly six thousand." This phrase does not allow for much extension beyond Ussher's dates, and it does not accommodate itself very well to the Septuagint — which, if the ages of the patriarchs are accepted as listed, would throw Creation back seventy-five hundred years.

The whole problem seems to revolve around three questions: (1) Is radioactive age-dating valid? (2) Were there geological changes of as comprehensive a magnitude between the Flood and the dawn of recorded history as the field evidence seems to demand? (3) Is it possible that ancient nations were developed during that time? These are questions that we shall not take the space to discuss now; I merely point them out as problems that must be faced and solved, if possible. The only alternative is to accept the Genesis time scale by faith, and leave the historical and geological problems open for further study.

II

Let us now turn to the scientific phase of Seventh-day Adventist creationism, for it is in this field that most of the perplexing problems lie. In

surveying this aspect of the subject, I will cite principal writings, past and present, and give brief analyses of their contributions to the current standing of the matter.

In 1902 George McCready Price published his first book.¹⁶ In it he challenged three theories that were being accepted by Christian churches: Lyell's uniformitarian theory of geology, Darwin's theory of organic evolution, and theistic evolution. Price called for a return to the "primitive principles," which he characterized as direct creation and no long ages of life succession.

Believing that geology was the key to the evolutionary problem, in 1906 he published another book, which he called *Illogical Geology*. In the preface he made the following statement about the book: "It is, so far as I know, the only work published . . . which does not treat the science of geology as more or less a cosmogony."¹⁷

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This small book challenged the theory of the succession of life, and asserted that if it were not really true, Darwinism would collapse. He was amazed, Price said, to see how the hypothesis of the succession of life was so continually assumed as a basis for evolutionary geology. To challenge this interpretation became the central theme of his writings for the next sixty years.

Price dominated the field of Seventh-day Adventist scientific philosophy for nearly a quarter of a century. His *Back to the Bible*,¹⁸ *Q.E.D.*,¹⁹ and *New Geology*²⁰ discussed all phases of modern science in relation to the problems of Creation, the Flood, and various aspects of scientific philosophy. Before he closed his long career of writing, lecturing, and teaching, he had published twenty-five books and scores of journal articles on creationism. One critic considered him "the last and greatest of the anti-evolutionists." His influence has been said to be "staggering," not only among Adventists, but in the Protestant world in general. By most Adventists he was regarded as almost inspired, and for years hardly anything was said in opposition to his published ideas.

My first direct contact with Price was in 1920, when he was teaching at Pacific Union College, where I was enrolled in his geology class. We had many profitable discussions, and it was he who inspired me to make geology a major line of study. He left the next year, and when I had finished my college course in 1922 I took over the biology department, where I remained until my retirement in 1956. I taught the geology course for twenty-five years, and assumed responsibility for the Home Study Institute correspondence course in geology in 1936 (I am still involved in this work). Since 1936 the course has been revised and brought up to date three times,

maintaining the principles laid down by Price while keeping the subject matter in line with the latest studies in the field.

As a teacher of geology I realized that I was under obligation to myself and my students to check critically every principle presented in the courses. In time I found, both by reading and by field observation, that certain assumptions made in *New Geology* needed revision; therefore, in 1946 I published *The New Diluvialism*.²¹ While some revisions in the interpretation of certain geological phenomena were made, the basic principles were in no way challenged. I upheld Price's contention that uniformitarianism is "unproved and unprovable," that there is no proof for the succession of life through long ages of time, and that the major geological features of the earth are the result of the Flood described in Genesis.

What I did find was that in three areas a somewhat different interpretation is necessary, as evidenced by plain facts in the field. These are the sequence of the fossils, tectonics, and glaciation. Whereas Price believed that there is no valid order to the fossils, I became convinced that there is, and that an explanation for this order can be found in the concept of ecological zonation. And although Price had not admitted the validity of overthrusts, I was convinced that the concept is valid. He had interpreted so-called glacial evidences in terms of water action, but I gathered data to show that mountain glaciation had had a much greater extension, and that the presence of ice sheets on the plains of the northern hemisphere is a valid concept. These interpretations are now generally accepted by Adventist scientists.

We have had to meet difficult questions in the field of biology also (organic evolution versus direct creation, for example). In a number of his books, Price argued that the "major type forms" were created, and that the present array of species had arisen from these types. The use of the word *species* by Price, Marsh, and myself has not always been made clear, but it appears to me that in Price's mind Linnaean *species* and the *type forms* were more or less synonymous. I have generally used the word *species* in the modern context. In some of Marsh's writings the word is enclosed in quotes to indicate a difference between his modern usage and the usage of Price and Ellen White.

Price was unable to develop his ideas about species as fully as might be desired. In *Q.E.D.*, published in 1917, he held to rather rigid views about changes in species, but in *Phantom of Organic Evolution*²² in 1924 he began to veer away from the idea of fixity of species. At this time the whole field of biology was in a state of flux: new knowledge of genetics was growing

rapidly, but the problem of speciation was still uncertain, because there had not yet been time to evaluate the consequences of the new knowledge.

Between 1935 and 1940 I made an extensive study of genetics and attempted to orient it to literal creation in *Genes and Genesis*.²³ As one might expect in a trial of this kind, criticism came from readers. The more conservative Adventists who were not familiar with the recent advances in biology thought the treatise was almost heretical, whereas colleagues in the field of biology, while offering suggestions and constructive criticism, were sympathetic. I studied these reactions and was ready to undertake a revision, when Frank L. Marsh published a study that was so close to what I would have written that I felt a revision of my book was unwarranted.

Marsh's book, *Evolution, Creation, and Science*,²⁴ discussed organic evolution versus creation so thoroughly that it has remained (as revised) one of the volumes in the Home Library series of the Review and Herald Publishing Association. It might be noted that in 1957 he published another work, *Life, Man and Time*,²⁵ now available in a 1967 revised edition, which I regard as one of the best treatises on literal creationism in print. This book and my book, *Genesis and Science*,²⁶ which was written for the layman rather than for the scientist, present the current thinking of conservative creationism in line with Adventist theology. To help science teachers in Adventist academies answer questions from students, the General Conference Department of Education published *Meaning of Nature*²⁷ in 1966. The author was Richard M. Ritland, director of the Geoscience Research Institute, Berrien Springs, Michigan.

In addition to these works, *Creation — Accident or Design?*,²⁸ by another Geoscience Research Institute staff member, Harold G. Coffin (assisted by Ernest S. Booth, Robert H. Brown, Ariel A. Roth, Edward E. White, and myself), gives a well-rounded picture of Adventist scientific interpretation of biological and geological problems from a conservative viewpoint. This book was designed as a college text, and it has also sold well to laymen.

During the past decade, the Geoscience Research Institute, which was set up by the General Conference, has promoted interest in the more puzzling aspects of geology and its relationship to the Genesis Flood. In 1960 a three-week tour of areas from Yellowstone National Park to the Grand Canyon, designed particularly for college science and religion teachers, helped many to understand actual conditions in the field. In 1965 and 1968 other tours included Adventist administrators in addition to scientists. These studies have resulted in a few changes of interpretation and have raised many questions that have not yet been answered.

It has been stated that Price's geological theory attributed practically all major geological features to the Flood. More recent studies have made it necessary to modify this viewpoint somewhat. Investigations on the lower Paleozoic rocks have led a number of us to believe that some of these deposits may have been formed before the Flood. It seems evident that the great reef formations found imbedded in strata as high as the Permian must already have been in existence when the great catastrophe occurred, at which time they were incorporated into the stratified rocks.

Some have wondered if before Creation week and the Flood there might have been long "ages" in which much of the geologic column could have been deposited. Such a view would leave the Flood as a comparatively minor occurrence, possibly taking place after the Cretaceous rocks had been deposited. Such suggestions meet with firm opposition from more conservative scholars, for they would introduce problems in what has generally been considered the orthodox interpretation of the Genesis record, both of Creation and the Flood. If the rocks below the Cretaceous stratum were deposited over long periods of time, the sequence of life in them must be interpreted in terms of such profound changes that no interpretation other than evolution could be possible, and traditional Adventist creationism would be in jeopardy.

A similar problem lies in the interpretation of the Tertiary rocks. In recent years a few of us who have been giving special attention to this problem (Booth, Coffin, Ritland, and I) have come to recognize the fact that some of the Tertiary geological phenomena must have occurred after the Flood. The question then arises: When did the Flood conclude? I can speak only for myself (but I am sure the others concur in general with my views) when I say that the closing paroxysms of the Flood are recorded in the rocks from Cretaceous up possibly as far as Oligocene strata. Part, perhaps much, of the Miocene stratum would be postdiluvial, and certainly Pliocene and Pleistocene strata must represent postflood phenomena.

This interpretation introduces some problems. It is evident from observation in the field that tremendous tectonic movements were involved in the production of many of the Miocene and Pliocene rocks, and that some profound changes took place while Pleistocene deposits were being laid down. How much time, then, would have been necessary to produce these changes? To some it seems impossible to account for such enormous changes in the time allowed by a short chronology based on Genesis five and eleven. What then, shall we do — push the time of the Flood back twelve thousand years as some creationists have done? Or shall we attempt to show how these

geological features could have been produced in a short time by sufficiently violent earth movements? This is one of the unsolved problems now facing Adventist scientists.

As I have been teaching the Home Study Institute geology course since 1936, I have found it necessary to keep informed on these problems in order to maintain the instruction on a sound scientific basis, but still in harmony with conservative views. One of the most difficult phases of this work has been the harmonizing of historical geology with Adventist theology. In order to make the study easier for my students I wrote *Fossils, Flood, and Fire*,²⁹ which discusses in detail the correlation between geological data and the traditional, conservative exegesis of the Genesis record of the Flood. A brief synopsis follows.

A comparatively pristine state persisted between Creation and the Flood. The violence of the Flood begins to show in the Ordovician and Silurian strata, as these rocks do show volcanic materials. Violence on a large scale, however, is not evident until the Pennsylvanian sedimentation. From here to the beginning of the Tertiary period we have remnants of the ancient life zones as they were destroyed successively and buried in sediments of sand and mud, forming great masses of stratified rocks. After the close of the Flood in the late Mesozoic or early Tertiary period came a short but violent postflood period in which Miocene, Pliocene, and Pleistocene deposits were laid down. The Pleistocene deposit includes glacial debris, which, it is argued, might have been produced in a much shorter time than is generally supposed.

III

Where are we now in our survey of traditional Adventist creationism? We have seen that Adventists, from the very first, held rigidly to a literal interpretation of the Genesis account of Creation in six days and a universal Flood. The question of the time of the creation of the substance of the earth was never settled, but statements by Ellen White caused Adventists (before the scientific developments of the past few years) to hold to the idea that the earth is about six thousand years old.

The scientific phase of Adventist creationism began with George McCready Price at the beginning of the century. His major points were in harmony with a strict interpretation: major geological features attributed to the Flood; no long periods of evolutionary geology; no changes in major types of life; present species of plants and animals result from changes *within* the created type forms.

On the question of the origin of the present species, other Adventist writers have followed the same line as Price, with illustrations and evidence brought from recent studies that Price was unable to have included in his studies. That the Flood was the cause of principal earth changes has also been regarded by later writers as a fundamental principle. Certain details were revised by Clark in 1946 and 1968, and by Coffin in 1969, but these do not discredit the premises that have been followed by Adventist writers.³⁰

In this study I have tried to present objectively the progress of creationist philosophy as it may be found in the publications of Seventh-day Adventist publishing houses.³¹ Some may feel that there are problems these books do not answer. That may be true, and if new evidence is discovered and studied, and, if it stands the scrutiny of qualified scientists and theologians, revisions may need to be made in some phases of our scientific philosophy. Until that can be done, we must remain committed to the viewpoints expressed in the literature that has been approved.

All who work on these momentous questions realize there are many points we do not yet understand, but we have tried to keep published materials in line with the principles that have been recognized throughout the history of the Seventh-day Adventist church. Certain truths will never change, and any acceptable interpretation must be in harmony with these truths. Developing solutions to such weighty problems is a long, slow process, and we must be careful not to allow false philosophies to influence our thinking.

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