



The Adventist Roots Of Creation Science

Ronald Numbers' carefully researched, readable account of how George McCready Price shaped conservative Protestantism.

by Gary Land

WITH THE PUBLICATION OF *THE CREATIONISTS*, Ronald L. Numbers, professor of the history of science and medicine at the University of Wisconsin, has contributed significantly to our understanding of the history of science and religion in modern America. He has explored the development of a major subculture within American life and thereby illuminates the complexities of the interaction of elite and popular thought. Interestingly, his account underscores the importance of Seventh-day Adventism's influence on conservative Protestantism, particularly the impact of the Seventh-day Adventist George McCready Price on the emergence of scientific creationism among militant evangelical Protestants.

In his first four chapters, Numbers argues that although many Protestant leaders in the 19th century opposed Darwinian evolution,

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hardly anyone promoted the concept of a young earth or the universal importance of Noah's flood. George Fredrick Wright, possibly the leading conservative Christian spokesman on geological matters, moved from being a Christian Darwinist to an association with fundamentalism in the early 20th century, but he appears to have accepted a form of evolution. *The Fundamentals*, published between 1910 and 1915 and to which Wright contributed, offered a wide variety of opinions on evolution.

By the 1920s two dominant interpretations of the Genesis creation story had become popular among conservative Christians. The idea that the days of Creation referred to long ages had been held by many 19th-century Christians and shaped the thinking of William Jennings Bryan, prosecutor at the Scopes trial. A second option, that there was a time gap between the first and second verses of Genesis and that the Creation story actually told of a re-creation, appeared in the widely read Scofield Bible in 1909 and seems to have become the most popular view among fundamentalists in

the 1920s. The well-known anti-evolution lecturers, Arthur I. Brown and Harry Rimmer, both advocated the latter, "gap theory."

The next five chapters tell the story of how a largely self-educated, armchair geologist, George McCready Price, gradually began to shape fundamentalist opinion. As early as the turn of the century, Price, influenced by Ellen G. White's belief that Noah's flood was worldwide and that the Sabbath doctrine required a six-day Creation, argued that the geological column did not exist and that geological phenomena were attributable to a single catastrophic deluge. By the 1920s, his writings were appearing in fundamentalist publications, although on Flood geology editors and readers seemed unaware that Price's views differed from their own.

The first attempt to develop an organization to promote creationism, the Religion and Science Association, established in 1935, floundered over the division between day-agers, gap theorists, and Flood geologists. The Deluge Science Society, formed in 1938, limited itself to Flood geologists and seems to have been dominated by Seventh-day Adventist physicians. But when Harold W. Clark, an Adventist teaching at Pacific Union College, began advocating the reality of the geological column, putting forward his ecological zonation theory as a creationist explanation, the society began to splinter.

Meanwhile, the American Scientific Affiliation, founded in 1941 to represent evangelical scientists, was becoming increasingly open to evolutionary thought. Conservatives became disturbed. The publication in 1954 of Bernard Ramm's *The Christian View of Science and Scripture*, which advocated progressive creationism, stimulated a reaction from John C. Whitcomb, Jr., an evangelical Bible teacher. In 1961 he combined forces with Henry M. Morris, an engineer, to write *The Genesis Flood*. The geological portion of the book

read, in Numbers' words, "like an updated version of [Price's] *The New Geology*" (p. 202).

Eventually selling more than 200,000 copies, *The Genesis Flood* thrust Whitcomb and Morris into the limelight, eventually leading to the establishment of the Creation Research Society, the attempt to open public schools to creationism, and the spread throughout the English-speaking world of what became known as "scientific creationism."

Numbers concludes that geology rose to prominence for four reasons: (1) Whitcomb and Morris "skillfully promoted it as biblical orthodoxy"; (2) it appeared to fit a "literal" reading of Scripture; (3) it provided a historical and theological symmetry with premillennial expectations of Christ's soon return; and (4) it gave "scientific sanctification" to a "non-evolutionary history of life" (pp. 338, 339).

This brief summary gives little indication of the complexity of Numbers' account. Not only does he trace the development of Flood geology, he also examines anti-evolutionary thought in England, follows the history of the American Scientific Affiliation, describes the various creationist institutions, looks at creationism's impact on the churches, and analyzes cases of alleged scientific persecution of creationists.

Through all the turns of his story, the author keeps his focus on the development of scientific creationism. He writes clearly and enlivens his account by effectively describing such personalities as Wright, Price, Morris, and Walter Lammerts, as well as the less respectable characters like Benjamin Allen and Clifford Burdick.

Numbers bases his study on a thorough reading of anti-evolutionary and creationist literature, ranging from major books to obscure pamphlets. He consulted the papers of more than 70 individuals and institutions, many of which remain in private hands. He also interviewed nearly 50 people connected with creationism. *The Creationists* is an im-

pressive and painstaking piece of research presented in a highly readable style.

Seventh-day Adventist readers will find Numbers' account fascinating, not only because of its description of Price, but also because it clarifies the history of Adventist creationism through Clark and Frank Marsh to the sometimes troubled history of the Geoscience Research Institute. Numbers also clearly demonstrates the tensions between Seventh-day Adventist and non-Seventh-day Adventist Flood geologists. Whitcomb and Morris, for instance, had to minimize their indebtedness to Price in *The Genesis Flood*, because of Adventism's suspect nature within the conservative Protestant community.

This volume gives readers much to consider. It is apparent that virtually no one turned to scientific creationism for scientific reasons; theological or philosophical factors played the major role. And, as the story of individuals within the American Scientific Affiliation reveals, holding to a conservative creationist position is very difficult for those studying geology. Not until 1979 did a Flood geologist emerge with both a Ph.D. in geology and a secure fundamentalist faith.

Although the conservative Christian community has been committed to Scripture, its members obviously read Genesis in various ways, which suggests that perhaps a "literal" reading is not so literal after all. Even within the Flood geology camp, considerable disagreement occurred over just what the Bible allowed. "The core belief was not a young earth . . . but a young life," Numbers writes. "On almost every other issue—from the age of the universe and the origin of the law of thermodynamics to the limits of organic variation and the number of fossils attributable to

Noah's flood—the scientific creationists indulged in open and spirited debate" (p. 336).

Curiously, creationists felt the need for their faith to receive the imprimatur of science. In reality, they tended to read the Bible with the same common sense—almost positivist—mindset with which they approached the physical world. It would be useful to know more about their assumptions regarding the nature of Scripture and religion. Creationists seem to have sometimes adopted the position that the "ends justify the means." The movement's sometimes cavalier quoting of scientific authorities and concern with winning debating points are disturbing. Although Numbers notes the self-criticism within the creationist movement, the persistent influence of Clifford Burdick's sloppy, if not dishonest, scientific efforts suggests that desire sometimes overcame careful thought and procedure.

Finally, as private individuals and as citizens, we are faced with the question of who we turn to for authority. Creationism is, in part, a reaction against a scientific elite that has wielded great power in determining the truth within our culture. When the truth of the elite conflicts with the truth of the populace, who should win, especially in the public schools? Highly technical science and a democratic society do not necessarily fit easily together, particularly when there is a conflict of fundamental assumptions.

The Creationists is essential reading for anyone interested in the recent history of religion or in the question of origins. Ronald L. Numbers, although saying he is an agnostic, has taken a motley crew of scientists, theologians, and publicists seriously and has given them a sympathetic hearing. Scholars and general readers alike will be indebted to him for many years to come.