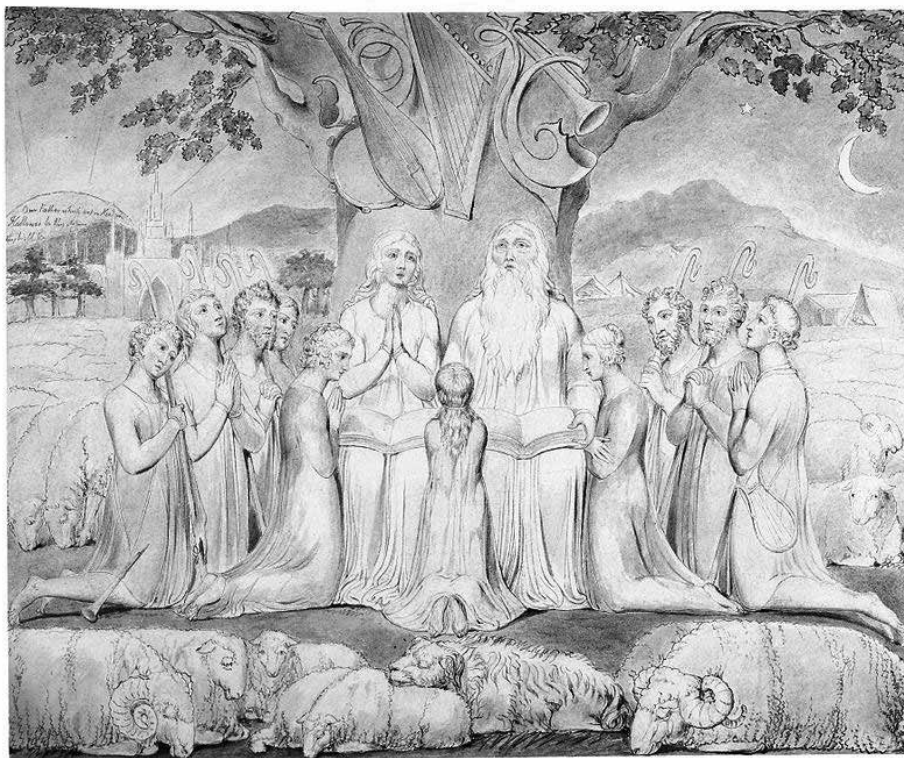


Things We Do Not Know

Job's Dilemma and the Future of Adventist Geoscience



Job and his Family by William Blake from *The Book of Job* (circa 1805–1806).

BY GERALD BRYANT

I was invited to speak at the Fiftieth-Anniversary Adventist Forum Conference because I represent a rare breed: the Adventist geologist. My advanced training is in sedimentary geology, interpreting the successive layers of sedimentary deposits, along with their fossil content. Those layers read like a book of ancient history, though, ideally, we find the latest news at the top and the background information at the bottom of the geological column; so, more like a newspaper article. In some ways, geology has distinct advantages over the study of past civilizations: its historical artifacts are less subtle than the symbolic representations of human culture; and there is

much broader access to primary sources. On the down side, it is not a very simple task to read the whole of the sedimentary record because it has been torn apart, pages scattered and lost. However, this book is so important that geologists go to great lengths to bring the pieces together and make sense out of them. This importance is not just economic, but spiritual, inasmuch as geologic history provides deep context to human history.

We read geologic history by exploring the physical evidence and constructing models that organize those features by their association with known processes. We call these “actualistic” or “process/response” models. This

type of historical reconstruction informs our attempts to mitigate environmental threats and to locate petroleum and mineral resources efficiently. Thus, economic applications provide impetus to historical investigations and successful application in exploration is one means of evaluating historical hypotheses. For example, meteorite-prospecting strategies in Antarctica are linked to modeling of the long-term behavior of the ice that covers most of the continent. This expanse provides an ideal catchment for rocky debris from space that survives frictional heating in the atmosphere; however, this would not be particularly useful if those captured meteorites remained buried and dispersed. That is where glacial dynamics come into play. As the East Antarctic ice sheet flows toward the coastline, it encounters topographic barriers that force the deep ice layers upward and facilitate melting. Through time, these dynamics concentrate meteorites and expose them at the surface, where they are visible as dark objects upon the glacial backdrop. Exploiting the geographic relationships intrinsic to this model, the Antarctic Search for Meteorites, a scientific endeavor sponsored by the National Science Foundation, NASA, and the Smithsonian Institution, has collected more meteorites in the last thirty years than were recovered from all around the Earth in the previous 500 years¹, dramatically lowering the cost and improving the availability of this material for scientific research.

Most of my own research has focused on sandstone outcrops, where I have discovered evidence of ancient quicksand flowing at depth, toppling dunes, and entombing animals. In other circumstances, I would choose to display some of my scenic field photos and explain the interpretive process or, perhaps, direct attention to remote-sensing images from the dune-covered surfaces of Venus, Titan, and Mars, where similar liquefaction features have been detected in recent Rover images; but I am not going to do that. Instead, I am going to take off my geology hat as quickly as possible and address you, more generically, as a fellow Christian, a church elder and Sabbath School leader; because, within Adventism, sedimentary geology is a religious concern.

Perhaps you have heard that the very doctrine of Christ's atonement hangs by the slim thread of our belief in a recent global flood.² It is claimed that this Flood, in the time of Noah, produced the bulk of the sedimentary record and its contained evidence for life—and death.

This idea has been favored by many, including Ellen White and other influential Adventists, because it implies a much shorter history of suffering and death than is envisioned through the lens of modern science. More to the point, it places geologic history within the traditional scope of the Genesis sin narrative, rather than within an undefined prehistory where predation and death in the animal kingdom set the stage for human history. Our theological traditions are not equipped to handle such a possibility; so conventional wisdom dictates that it cannot be true. Under these circumstances, some feel justified in promoting the Flood hypothesis as the guiding premise in the interpretation of fossil-bearing sedimentary successions and circumventing the relatively slow and unpredictable validation processes of mainstream science.³ Let me be particularly clear on this point, since it tends to be obscured by the presentations typically made in our churches: there is no actualistic model of the Flood. Though the idea that the Flood was the primary agent in the production of the geologic record is theologically attractive (and relatively child-friendly), it has not proven useful, scientifically. It remains an *ad hoc* conceptual framework and does not provide a stable platform for ongoing research. A viable Flood model would, at minimum:

1. Enable consistent identification of the start and end of the Flood in the sedimentary record. (Change in process should be reflected in the product.)
2. Provide process explanations for the intricate sedimentary architectures that we observe. (The Flood, as a geologic agent, cannot remain a sedimentological “black box.”)
3. Account for the orderly distribution of body fossils. (They are clearly not hydraulically sorted, so . . .)
4. Explain why there are footprints and nests and other signs of life throughout the rock record. (Unparalleled survival skills?)
5. Identify coexisting sources for the various layers in each local succession. (Multiple distinct layers of sediment and fossils require multiple sources, in

a catastrophic model, and a correspondingly vast surface area.)

6. Integrate the evidence for concurrent igneous and metamorphic processes. (How do the process implications of such features as the Deccan traps, Hawaiian Islands/Emperor Seamounts, Utah laccoliths, and widespread fossiliferous metasediments fit into a catastrophic flood model?)
7. Demonstrate how a Flood model systematically harmonizes the vast array of observed field relationships and makes useful predictions about the distribution of geologic materials. (How did the Flood carve the Grand Canyon at the same time the Great Basin was being choked with local sediment? If exploration geologists are so wrong about process, what petroleum plays are they overlooking?)

If validated, a functional Flood model would revolutionize sedimentary geology and redirect the exploration initiatives of vast financial enterprises; but our treatment of the topic does not trend in that direction. That is, the Flood hypothesis is not competing for respectability within the established forums of the scientific community. Instead, it is being sustained by apologetics that backfill the evidentiary void between hypothesis and theory with a collage of assertions, plausibilities, and boutique explanations, while polemics against mainstream science insulate the hypothesis from falsification.

This approach has been remarkably successful within our community of faith and among Fundamentalist Christians, generally, if success is measured in widespread acceptance; but does that make the Flood hypothesis true? The Bible does not speak directly to this issue; so, in the absence of physical validation, we are depending on lesser religious authorities. I have heard the most avid Adventist defenders of the Flood hypothesis invoke Ellen White's authority, which invites a different kind of discussion than I wish to facilitate. My point, here, does not depend on any specific conclusion regarding the authority of Ellen White in matters of geoscience. I just want to illustrate out how far off topic we have wandered in our corporate testimony to the gospel. We have shored up our theology

of the atonement with claims regarding geologic history, and we have shored up that position with supplementary claims of extra-Biblical authority. How does this improve upon the testimony of Scripture and its direct validation through personal spiritual experience?

If Adventists had demonstrated extraordinary insight and general expertise in geoscience, then perhaps that field would provide a suitable platform for outreach; but such is not the case. Though the Adventist community is a bastion of evidence-based research and practice in the health sciences, in Earth science it is a haven for any hypothesis that promises to salve our theological discomforts. How we fell into this predicament is an important question that I will leave to others.⁴ My own primary concern is what to do moving forward. What better options are at our disposal for meeting the theological challenges of this scientific age? That sounds like such a modern issue, but it is really just an old dilemma in a modern package: how to deal with the things that we do not know. We do not know how the sacred account, recorded in the first few chapters of Genesis, relates to our emerging knowledge of Earth history. We simply do not know. How, then, shall we deal with this ignorance? I believe that Scripture offers a wealth of guidance on this issue. I'd like to direct your attention to one instance that seems to me tailor-made for our circumstances.

You remember the story of Job, how he suffered four catastrophes in a single day. First, the Sabeans stole his donkeys and oxen, killing the attending servants. When a surviving servant brought this very bad news to Job, he was no doubt appalled; but it was a rough neighborhood and these things happened, just never before to him. He could mend the breach in his security, enlarge his household, and restore his wealth, eventually. But then, on the heels of the first report, another sole survivor approached Job, reporting an extraordinary lightning strike that had consumed all his sheep, and his shepherds, too. This was trouble of a different sort: fire from heaven. God's fingerprints were all over it. Still, the bad news kept coming in. Three Chaldean raiding parties made off with all Job's camels, killing the herders. Now it was clear that Job's political network had disintegrated, taking with it the entire outer tier of his household and leaving him vulnerable in a harshly competitive world; but worse news was already at his door. A mighty wind had collapsed the house where all ten of his children were

partying, killing them and their attendants. The ultimate tragedy, another heavenly signature.

Things could not get any worse. Two rounds of shattering one-two punches: one punch from society, the other from God. Utter devastation in Job's household. Job's response? "The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; may the name of the LORD be praised" (Job 1:21b).⁵ And then things got worse. Another round of attacks, even more personal. This time, the opening hit came from God, stripping Job of health and physical comfort, and the closer came from his own wife, as her sympathy withered away. "Are you still maintaining your integrity? Curse God, and die," (Job 2:9) she urged. But Job replied, "Shall we accept good from God and not trouble?" (Job 2:10b).

When Job's three friends gathered around him, sitting mute for a week, it must have seemed a hopeful sign. Here, at last, an enclave of human support? But any such thoughts quickly evaporated after Job's cry of misery sounded the opening bell for a fresh round of oppression. One by one, in multiple successions of progressively brutal attacks, the three friends hammer Job with their conventional wisdom, even claiming special knowledge as they press him to forsake the secret sins that must have occasioned his misfortune. As he replies to these pious invectives, Job's reasoning is trapped within similar assumptions as his peers; but he searches beyond a mere reward/punishment relationship to God, seeking larger truths and a more personal connection:

If I have sinned, what have I done to you, you who see everything we do? Why have you made me your target? Have I become a burden to you? Why do you not pardon my offenses and forgive my sins? For I will soon lie down in the dust; you will search for me, but I will be no more (Job 7:20–21).

He says this even as he awaits the second blow of that fourth round of one-two punches: God's final act to end his life. Job has already lost all earthly support and every vestige of divine favor, yet he continues to trust in God: "Though he slay me, yet will I hope in him." (Job 13:15).

I know that my redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand on the earth. And after my

skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God; I myself will see him with my own eyes—I, and not another (Job 19:25–27).

Do you see that Job's dilemma was not how to endure his physical pain or how to survive without resources or how to regain status or, even, how to cope with the loss of his family? In the Biblical account, the horrible tragedies he endured serve to accentuate the crucial nature of Job's core concern. Job's dilemma consisted of his inability to reconcile history with his understanding of God. It was a spiritual and epistemic crisis. Job did not understand what was going on any more than did his three friends. They were all blind to the heavenly reality revealed to the reader in the opening scene of this story: Job was not under attack because God was angry at him. Quite the contrary, it was because God was so very pleased with him: "Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one on earth like him; he is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil" (Job 1:8). How could they know? How can any of us know how much we do not know? We, like they, try to connect the dots before they are all in place. Within Adventism, I commonly hear this idea as a criticism directed at science; but it is even more true of theology — our own theology as well as everyone else's — or is the creation more complex than the Creator? God is greater than we know, greater than we imagine, greater than we can imagine.

At the end of Job's story, when God finally reveals Himself, He does not rush in with apologies and explanations. His presence, His unveiled greatness, is enough. Job is satisfied and reaffirmed in his faith, and God restores him to fellowship with his frenemies. That is what we need, too: a firmer sense of the great and immanent God. Not just familiarity with the pleasing little images of God that we fashion with our intellects and shape with our needs, but contact with the magnificent God who created a cosmos that shocks us and pushes us to search beyond established conventions. That God did not need the protection of Job's over-eager friends, and He does not seek ours. Desperate theodicies belie our hope in God's imminent unveiling. Do we no longer remember what it means to be Adventist?

I believe that the way forward for Adventist geoscience, and for the next generation of Adventist scientists, begins with these three fundamental theological truths:

1. God is the Creator.
2. He is greater than we know.
3. We can trust Him to lead us beyond every difficulty.

These truths simplify our own epistemic dilemmas by relieving us of responsibility for managing the cosmic context of the gospel. We can explore the timing, extent, and effects of the Genesis flood as the scientific questions they are, without fear of somehow diminishing God's power in the lives of our children. I believe that sheltering our young people within a bubble of pseudo-scientific claims is exactly the wrong approach. We must trust them to explore beyond our own conceptualizations and we should encourage them to discard every intellectual idol they encounter upon our thrones of knowledge. Let their science be a gateway to knowledge, not a diversion around it.

In His vindication of Job, God indicted His own would-be defenders: "I am angry with you and your two friends, because you have not spoken the truth about me, as my servant Job has" (Job 42:7b). If we hope to avoid similar censure, we must release our testimony of God from its tether to the perceived needs of the denomination. It is not about us, there are larger issues in play. As dramatized in the story of Job, these higher priorities are not served by pretension or political manipulation. There is no place for coercion or devaluation of those with whom we disagree. God's appearance on the scene of Job's travail makes this clear. He does not merely declare a winner in the great debate but prioritizes repair of the very deep rupture between Job and his friends: "My servant Job will pray for you, and I will accept his prayer and not deal with you according to your folly" (Job 42:8b). I dare to hope that Adventists who fear the prospect of a theology compromised by science, as well as those who disdain a theology dismissive of science, will be able to find more congenial and constructive ways to address their concerns, also. Too many of our disagreements are founded in differences of philosophy and argued as differences of faith.

Foreshadowing Christ's ministry, Job's perseverance through horror and humiliation opened up the opportunity for reconciliation. I recommend that we, also, persevere in doing good within our own spheres of

responsibility, neither under-achieving nor over-reaching the brief God assigns. To enable this, let us resolve, once again, to become people of the Book; but we must be more than that. We must become people of the two books. Without the Bible, we could hardly begin to fathom God's goodness and grace. Without the testimony of nature, in all its various expressions, we cannot hope to maintain an appropriate appreciation of God's greatness. We must respect the book of nature, read that book, and share that book, just as we do its companion volume. Like Job, our children can be fortified by their personal experience of God's grace, even as they are challenged by their own clear-eyed reading of the books of nature and revelation.

Endnotes

1. Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History, *Antarctic Meteorite Program*. Retrieved November 7, 2018, from <https://mineralsciences.si.edu/research/meteorites/antarctica/index.htm>.
2. Perhaps the most broadly representative presentation of this viewpoint is a volume edited by a systematic theologian at Andrews University: John T. Baldwin, ed., *Creation, Catastrophe, and Calvary* (Hagerstown, Maryland: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2000).
3. The entire issue of *Origins*, Number 64, is devoted to this topic, with two feature articles by Leonard Brand: "Worldviews and predictions in the scientific study of origins," *Origins* 64, (2015): 7–20; and "Naturalism: its role in science," *Origins*, 64, (2015): 21–37.
4. Following the classic work by Ron Numbers, *The Creationists: The Evolution of Scientific Creationism* (New York: Knopf, 1992), in its multiple editions, there is a growing volume of work on this topic. This includes, notably, a dissertation by Cornelis Bootsman, an Adventist geographer who recently completed a second PhD investigating the history of geological thought in Adventism: Cornelis Bootsman, "The nineteenth century engagement between geological and Adventist thought and its bearing on the twentieth century flood geology movement," PhD thesis, Avondale College of Higher Education, (2016). Available from the author on ResearchGate.
5. All Bible passages are quoted from the New International Version (NIV).



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