

## Toppling the Timescale Part I: Evaluating the Terrain

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### Abstract

**T**he geologic timescale has stood as a fortress of uniformitarian natural history for nearly two centuries. It is an intellectual idol that must be overthrown in order to reassert biblical authority in the realm of natural history. Most creationist critiques focus on empirical detail and thus fail to address the weak religious and philosophical foundations of the timescale. These foundations, rooted in the worldview of naturalism, are the key to overthrowing the flawed and misleading timescale.

### Introduction

Lyell's *Principles of Geology* was published nearly thirty years before Darwin's *Origin of Species*, and its Victorian vision of a well-regulated uniformitarianism opened wide the door to the long ages Darwin would need for his "struggle for survival." Perhaps it is not surprising then that evolution has proven less resistant than its geological precursor to a robust Christian response. Many who reject evolution find a multibillion-year history quite reasonable. Perhaps such inconsistency reflects the successful debunking of the icons of evolution, while the crowning achievement of uniformitarianism—the geologic timescale—remains intact, with most criticisms focused on the amount of time rather than the construct that generates it.

Why is the timescale so compelling? After all, the modern creationist movement traces its roots to *The Genesis Flood*, a book that strongly opposed it. I

believe that our failure to discredit the timescale arises from an inability to see beneath its attractive framework to its foundations that were firmly established to overthrow biblical history. To correct this error, we must see uniformitarian history as a cornerstone of the naturalist worldview (Reed, 2001). Then we must discredit its icon—the timescale. Not simply the *time*, but the *timescale*.

This series will examine the foundational methods and assumptions behind the geologic timescale, rather than rehash opposition to its 4.55 billion years. The amount of time has changed before and may change again, but the structure that generates the time stays the same. Another benefit of this approach will be the correction of the misimpression that the timescale is nothing more than an empirical compilation of the rock record.

As presented by modern stratigraphers, the geologic timescale (Figure

1) is "the framework for deciphering the history of the Earth" (Gradstein, 2004, p. 3). That definition is aimed at professional stratigraphers, so I would expand it to: "a global standard for correlating the various rock units of the Earth's crust by means of standardized time periods derived from a combination of relative and absolute dating methods." It is a complex construct with overlapping (and not always consistent) layers of assumptions and an ever-growing list of methods. In Part II of this series I will revisit its development (cf. Mortenson, 2006), revealing its seminal axiom. This first part will explore how the timescale is an integral part of the worldview of naturalism.

### The Man Behind the Curtain

Suffice it to say, any Christian should approach the timescale skeptically, recognizing: (1) that the Bible is also "a framework for deciphering the history of the Earth," and (2) that advocates of the timescale are strongly biased against the Bible. That is because any "framework" for earth history is ultimately an

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interpretation based on an underlying worldview. Conflicting “frameworks” represent conflicting worldviews, and those conflicts must be resolved at an axiomatic level.

Some people mistakenly believe that the timescale is inherent to the rocks. Like Aaron’s story of the golden calf, they think the timescale just popped out of the fire of geologic investigation. But even its definition reveals its role as a template, distinct from the rocks. That is why Reed and Froede (2003) suggested using different terms to distinguish the *empirical* “rock record” from the conceptual “geologic column.” Unfortunately, few creationists seem inclined to think that way, accepting the timescale on the empirical terms offered by its proponents (cf. Reed and Oard, 2006).

That is unfortunate because the blurring of the empirical and conceptual and of “science” and “history” is a significant Enlightenment error—strangely one that is more easily recognized and debunked when the topic is evolution. For some inexplicable reason, that critique (e.g., Johnson, 1991; 1993; 1995) has not been applied to geology, even though the timescale exhibits the same philosophical errors. Since advocates of naturalism posit a “prehistory” open only to forensic investigation, they equate science and history. Thus, secular geologists are consistently wrong when they present the timescale as no more than a systemized collection of worldwide observations of data. Creationists who do the same are both wrong and inconsistent:

So, the heart of the debates about the age of the earth and about how to correctly interpret the geological record is a massive worldview conflict (Mortenson, 2006, p. 16, emphasis added).

An understanding of the history of the timescale helps us recognize its philosophical roots. Though the worldview conflict was muted in the early years of geology, it was plain enough at the time of Lyell. At the heart of the

“new geology” was the conscious rejection of Noah’s Flood and the reliability of Scripture (Mortenson, 2004). Early uniformitarians disguised their intentions in public, but their strategic aims were clear in their private correspondence, typified in a letter written by Lyell in 1830.

I am sure you may get into Q.R. [*Quarterly Review*] what will free the science [of geology] from Moses, for if treated seriously, the [church] party are quite prepared for it. A bishop, Buckland ascertained (we suppose [Bishop] Sumner), gave Ure a dressing in the *British Critic and Theological Review*. They see at last the mischief and scandal brought on them by Mosaic systems.... Probably there was a beginning—it is a metaphysical question, worthy of a theologian—probably there will be an end. Species, as you say, have begun and ended—but the analogy is faint and distant. Perhaps it is an analogy, but all I say is, there are, as Hutton said, ‘no signs of a beginning, no prospect of an end’.... All I ask is, that at any given period of the past, don’t stop inquiry when puzzled by refuge to a ‘beginning,’ which is all one with ‘another state of nature,’ as it appears to me. But there is no harm in your attacking me, provided you point out that it is the proof I deny, not the probability of a beginning.... I was afraid to point the moral, as much as you can do in the Q.R. about Moses. Perhaps I should have been tenderer about the Koran. Don’t meddle much with that, if at all.

If we don’t irritate, which I fear that we may (though mere history), we shall carry all with us. If you don’t triumph over them, but compliment the liberality and candour of the present age, the bishops and enlightened saints will join us in despising both the ancient and modern physico-theologians. It is just the

time to strike, so rejoice that, sinner as you are, the Q.R. is open to you.

P.S. ...I conceived the idea five or six years ago [1824–25], that if ever the Mosaic geology could be set down without giving offence, it would be in an historical sketch, and you must abstract mine, in order to have as little to say as possible yourself. Let them feel it, and point the moral (Lyell, 1881, I:268–271, brackets added, as cited by Mortenson, 2006, pp. 17–18).

These are clearly not the words of a neutral purveyor of scientific truth, and coming from the founder of the “new geology,” they cast the pall of bias on his work as well as that of his successors. Lyell was an enthusiastic proponent of the geological column and its old-earth timescale; which lay at the center of the geological revolution. The timescale is far more than an empirical compilation of European geology—uniformitarians of the nineteenth century were not only biased against the Bible, but acted with malice aforethought.

The timescale can only be one and the same with the rocks if they come labeled in the field. In that case, there would be no need for stratigraphy or stratigraphers (see Reed et al., 2006a). But the rocks require interpretation, and the non-empirical foundations of the timescale are again revealed in a simple syllogism:

1. The timescale presents history.
2. History requires philosophy.
3. Philosophy requires and implies a worldview.
4. Therefore, the timescale requires and implies a worldview.

As we have seen, that worldview is not biblical Christianity.

Is this syllogism valid? The timescale is the summation of natural history. Contrary to those who see natural history as a purely scientific enterprise, *the investigation of unique past events is history* (Adler, 1965). Despite the efforts of Enlightenment philosophers and

their intellectual heirs to lump as much knowledge as possible under the umbrella of “science,” the true categories of knowledge are not so easily displaced. However, two centuries of this “big lie” have caused considerable confusion. Even many creationists do not see this error; opting for a watered-down appeal to “operations” vs. “origins” science—a definition without a distinction. The real error is resolved only by recognizing a clear demarcation between science and history. Thus, contrary to the claims of modern secularists (and the acquiescence of too many Christians) natural history is not science *per se*; it is a subset of history, distinguished by its goals and methods from human history. Science is not the arbiter of natural history; it is its forensic servant and natural history is thus a “mixed question” (Adler, 1965; Reed, 2000; 2002; Reed and Froede, 2003; Reed et al., 2006a; 2006b).

Since natural history and the geologic timescale present history, then they are inextricably tied to philosophy (whether modern practitioners like it or not), since history rests on philosophical underpinnings. As Clark (1994) explained:

History requires philosophy. Not only is the need for philosophy seen in the earlier difficulties and puzzles, but it is also seen, where some people do not expect it, in the very definition of history... Implicit in their formulations are their views of man, of society, of God, and therefore of knowledge... whatever his definition and extended views of history are, there must always be an underlying and controlling philosophy. It can be ignored, but it cannot be avoided. (pp. 21–22.)

These inherent and necessary philosophical assumptions are neon signs advertising the presence of a worldview at the foundation of the timescale, and it takes little effort to identify that worldview as atheistic naturalism. In that respect, uniformitarianism and its timescale are

no different than evolution and its icons. It is a view of history that dismisses the creative and providential works of God in history and denies His revelation of those acts in the Bible. Thus, if creationists do not recognize and attack this foundation, the timescale will remain relatively intact and the inhabitants of its ivory tower will remain undisturbed.

Like biologists who think evolution is “pure science,” most modern geologists are indignant that the timescale should be thought as anything less. They believe that they can point to an outcropping layer, a well log deflection, or a seismic reflector and identify each one as “Jurassic” or “Silurian” or “Proterozoic.” Their ability to perceive a particular stratum masks the questionable set of hidden assumptions that enables the *conceptual* transformation of that tangible rock into intangible history and the worldview inherent in it. As this series proceeds, the non-empirical aspects of the timescale will become more and more evident.

### Creationist Responses

Creationists have shown a wide range of response to the timescale, but the majority opinion (i.e., Snelling et al., 1996) seems to be an acceptance of its structure—globally correlated rocks units corresponding to historical intervals (e.g., Cambrian, Cretaceous, Carboniferous)—coupled with a rejection of its absolute dates for those intervals. Even that position is a minority view among Christian intellectuals. Most, notably ID advocates, accept both the framework and the absolute age (while vigorously fighting its philosophical twin, Darwinism).

Others have rejected both ages and structure (e.g., Froede, 1995; Reed et al., 2006b; Walker, 1994; Woodmorappe, 1981; 1983). They recognize that stripping the column of its 4.55 billion year chronology is akin to cutting the rattles off of a live rattlesnake—they might be making the most noise but are not

the end you should worry about. Deep time is only a part of the problem; the framework that enables deep time also ensures that the Flood is defined by a non-biblical version of history when it is considered at all. Another danger of creationists accepting the general structure is that they (like uniformitarians) fail to see a distinction between the empirical rock record and the conceptual column—an error that exacerbates the confusion between science and history.

Even those creationists who reject the column’s structure usually keep their arguments on an empirical plane (e.g., Oard, 2006). The most comprehensive of these are those of Woodmorappe (1981; 1983), who demonstrated that the actual arrangement of the time units in the field does not approach the ideal of the timescale. Most empirical critiques by creationists examine local problems in correlation; the most common being out-of-order strata. The timescale has proven remarkably resistant to these assaults because the few empirical contraries cited are overwhelmed by a multitude of empirical studies that supposedly affirm the column elsewhere. Besides, empirical contraries can never dislodge a conceptual construct.

This series will not focus on these empirical particulars but will concentrate instead on assumptions and methods behind the timescale. If nothing else, this will clarify the foundational role of naturalism. Diluvial geology cannot prosper until it discredits the uniformitarian history that denies the biblical record. Since the timescale is a trans-empirical construct, our examination must move away from the empirical and go straight to that error. Only then can we restore biblical primacy in history and a proper understanding of Creation and the Flood.

### Conclusion

The geologic timescale is much more than the compilation of the boundaries

of various empirical rock units. It is an alternate history; one without Creation or the Flood. Even if we strip away the absolute time, a framework remains that has been built on a foundation of naturalism. Most creationists have framed their critiques empirically. These not only fall short of the source of the error, but have been unable to create a consensus among creationists. That failure is another indication that the issue lays outside the boundaries of science. The following parts of this series will identify and critique assumptions, which will in turn reveal logical flaws in the stratigraphic methods that support today's timescale. Until we uproot the foundations, it will remain an imposing obstacle to any diluvial model.

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