

# **Rocks aren't Clocks**

A Critique of the  
Geologic Timescale

John K. Reed

CREATION BOOK PUBLISHERS  
POWDER SPRINGS, GEORGIA

# Contents

---

- 1 Probing Assumptions behind Geologic Time
- 2 A Primer on the Geologic History and its Timescale
- 3 Four Common Pitfalls
- 4 Philosophical Foundations of the Timescale
- 5 The Cornerstone of the Timescale
- 6 Unreliable Clocks
- 7 From Science to Dogma
- 8 Christians and the Timescale
- 9 Rocks aren't Clocks

*Appendix: The Origin of the Timescale*

# Probing Assumptions Behind Geologic Time

## Introduction

In recent years, Christians have challenged Western culture's use of science to promote its secular worldview, which functions as a competing religion. A skeptical scientific minority has driven much of this effort; their critiques of evolution have shaken the foundations of the secular establishment.<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, many Christians accept the secular 'history', unaware or unwilling to see the worldview behind it. Fewer still have critiqued geologic history, which provides the basis for evolution. Many Christians, including critics of evolution, have decided that a young Earth is a bridge too far. Enthusiastically opposed to evolution, they are reticent to criticize the billions of years that mark its progress. Despite these obstacles, creationists<sup>2</sup> have, for the first time since the 1800s, asserted a cogent, consistent case for the Bible's account of history against both evolution and geologic time.

Although creationists agree that the Earth is young, they have not yet developed a unified critique of secular history's repository of billions of years—the geologic timescale.<sup>3</sup> This construct is at the heart of the argument for an old Earth. Some reject it, some accept part of it, and some think it basically accurate as long as the quantity of time is reduced to the thousands of years of the Bible.

This book will look beyond the mere quantity of time, will explore the underlying conceptual structure of the timescale, and will argue that its framework is antithetical to biblical history. A careful examination of its assumptions and methods should convince those committed to biblical fidelity that it is necessary to reject both deep time<sup>4</sup> and its framework. This is certainly controversial, but if we are to take seriously the biblical account in Genesis, it is a debate that needs to be argued and resolved.

As an aside, this is not a book about radiometric dating. When most people think of rocks as 'clocks', the various isotopic 'dating' schemes automatically come to mind. Apologists for secular Earth history call these methods 'clocks', to give the impression that they are accurate, precise, and objective. Because of their importance in Earth history since the early 1900s, many creationists have examined and critiqued these methods.<sup>5</sup> Those works are both necessary and helpful, but the concept that rocks could be used to assemble a chronology for a vast prehistory was entrenched long before radiometric dating was introduced. Because it was developed prior to radiometric dating, both historically and logically,<sup>6</sup> the timescale itself demands our attention, if for no other reason than if radiometric techniques were abandoned, the timescale would still stand.

Therefore, this book focuses on the original edifice of antibiblical history, the geologic timescale. Radiometric methods are discussed, but only in the context of the several techniques that support the structure of deep time.

## **Ideas have consequences**

Ideas drive actions. When Jesus noted that a tree was known by its fruit,<sup>7</sup> he wasn't talking about agriculture. If we believe Jesus, and if the geologic timescale is not true, then we should expect 'bad fruit'. Furthermore, common sense tells us that any idea that reinvents history probably has an ulterior motive directed towards changing the present. During the 20th century, for example, Marxism plunged millions into misery. Its adherents rewrote the past to gain power in the present. Many

used that power to oppress and kill; ironically, this occurred most frequently in 'enlightened' atheist regimes.

Divergent ideas about the past drive many of today's conflicts. For example, does the Dome of the Rock rest on Mohammed's holy site or Abraham's? Considering how many have died supporting these opposing positions, it is clear that people's views of the past powerfully influence the present.

Marxism (and several other bad ideas) can be traced to Darwinism. Despite shrill denials, the links between Darwin and despots are irrefutable ... usually because the tyrants in question claimed to be Darwinists! 'Social Darwinists' strove for power in the late 1800s, Nazis and communists attempted secular totalitarianism in the 1900s, and more subtle forms are manifested in today's ruling classes, who continue to use evolution as a convenient justification to separate 'higher' and 'lower' members of humanity.

If evolution has been used to justify the pursuit of power, what has been used to justify evolution? Modern scientific secularism was not created from nothing in 1859. Historians have traced its roots well back before Darwin. In fact, one of the first secular histories was published in 1749,<sup>8</sup> more than a century before Darwin's *Origin of Species*. Through the late 1700s, studies of the Earth coalesced into what we know today as geology, which enjoyed a secular emphasis from its earliest days. Buffon led the way in rejecting biblical history; today's natural history assumes atheism.

One way geologic history can be distinguished from biblical history is by the term 'prehistory'. Even this term is 'secular' in the sense that the history part of it is defined by the actions of men, not God. For secular geologists and other secular thinkers, prehistory represents almost the entire past of the planet—billions of years that predate human civilization.

The template of prehistory is the geologic timescale (figure 1.1). It is a linear chronology following a number of distinct ages, through four grand *eons*—the *Hadean*, *Archean*, *Proterozoic*, and *Phanerozoic*.

Although the Phanerozoic is the best known, its three *eras* of the Paleozoic, Mesozoic, and Cenozoic make up only a little more than ten percent of Earth’s supposed past.

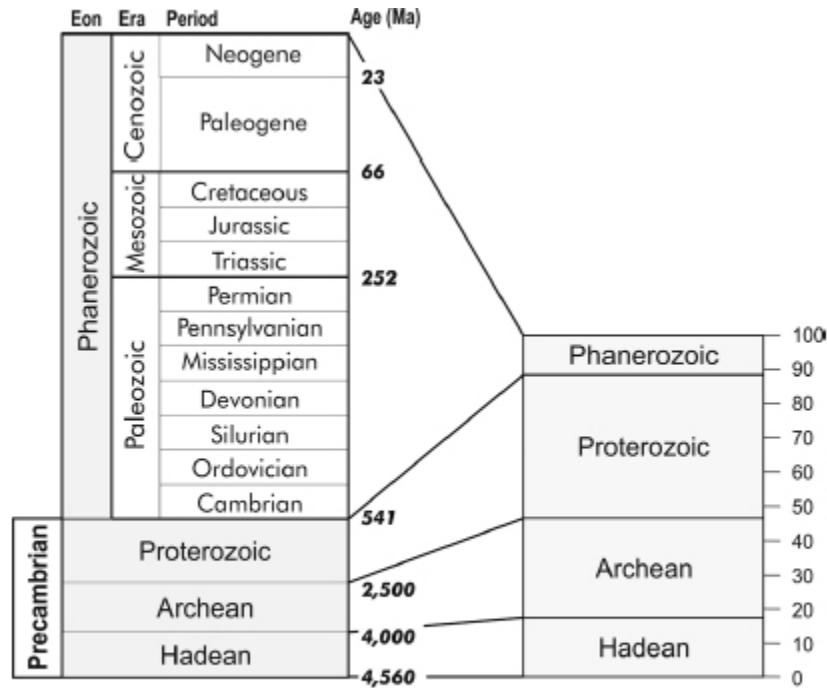


Figure 1.1. A simplified version of the geologic timescale. Ages in millions of years before present (Ma). To right, the four shaded eons are shown to scale against their respective percentages of deep time.

Despite its orderly precision, the timescale leaves ample room for the imagination. Numerous television specials have explored ‘events’ of this history—past geological upheavals, shifting plates, and the proud progression of life from algae to dinosaurs to man, the pinnacle of evolution.

So what’s wrong with the timescale? An obvious problem is its unquestioned acceptance by almost everyone. Ideas that we never think about can be our best friends or worst enemies. If true, they free our mind for other tasks. But if false, they lead to intellectual dead ends because, though we never think about them, we always think with them. Erroneous common sense is a mental cancer. For example, historians after the so-called Enlightenment made much of the ‘Dark Ages’ as a time of barbarism and cultural regression. Although new studies show a quite

different reality, including a burst of technological and social progress during those centuries,<sup>9</sup> the continued use of the term forces an erroneous view of the past onto our minds.

Likewise, even the name 'geologic timescale' implies a definite view of the past. It is a view that exalts science. There is no doubt that it permeates society. It appears in textbooks, motion pictures, and television documentaries. It appeals to children fascinated with dinosaurs as much as to tenured dons of prestigious universities. Hollywood has used computer graphics to bring the past to life; through our televisions we can walk with cavemen and dinosaurs. It is even promoted at tourist destinations around the world.

Therefore, any critique of geologic time must face a tide of popular acceptance, a tide further complicated by the fallacy C.S. Lewis called 'chronological snobbery'. We think that the accumulation of technology makes us smarter than our forefathers because we have a more advanced science. When combined with another fallacy that depicts science as the eventual victor over oppression by religion, human pride in technology fosters an irrational fear of religion as a dark force that will take away its toys. People turn to scientists, not theologians, as the arbiters of truth. So when the timescale is presented as science, people automatically grant it uncritical acceptance. And any opposition by 'outmoded religion' is viewed with dark suspicion.

So any critique of the timescale must address these interlocking fallacies. But despite the assertions of legions of scientists, science is not infallible. Many theories prove false over time. The history of science shows a struggle to sort through a morass of bad ideas in pursuit of a few pearls. Honest scientists maintain doubts about many ideas that the public sees as solid fact. Theories come and go; many do not survive.

In addition to the timescale being a pervasive part of modern secular culture, it is an idea with theological implications. The assertion that there is no God is just as much a theological statement as the assertion that there is. The timescale assumes that God is absent from history. That perspective is quite different from orthodox Christianity's belief in a God

who is intimately involved in history from the very beginning. Every person who prays assumes that God is present, that He is listening, and that He understands the context. Because secular natural history dismisses God, we see that history—at heart—is a *theological* issue.

Another problem is the confusion that secular geologic history inevitably creates over the boundaries of intellectual disciplines. What is science? What is theology? What is history? In which discipline does knowledge of time reside? Two obvious answers to the latter are science and history. Both are empirical disciplines. However, we have traditionally understood science as providing knowledge of observable natural phenomena and universal principles of nature, just as we have understood history as being an investigation into unique past events. Secular scientists talk about ‘scientific history’, but what does that mean? And if scientific knowledge about present-day phenomena is often not clear, then why should scientific ideas about the past be any less so? One of the problems of history is that uncertainty tends to increase with time because evidence becomes more fragmentary. If science, which strives to minimize uncertainty, insists on addressing the past, then it cannot help but be affected by this sort of uncertainty. And if we cannot be confident of events happening a few centuries ago (e.g. the myth of the ‘Dark Ages’), then how confident can we be about events that happened hundreds of millions of years ago?

One of the first issues to address is to decide which branches of knowledge are legitimate sources of truth about the past. Throughout this book, I will argue that natural history does not belong to any one discipline, but is a mixture of science, history, philosophy, and religion. Science provides a forensic analysis. History provides a meta-narrative, and worldviews<sup>10</sup> (which include theology and philosophy) provide the necessary context for meta-theories such as evolution or creation. This is quite different from the simplistic ‘science vs religion’ template most of us were taught in school. That false view developed hand-in-hand with the modern secular worldview of naturalism,<sup>11</sup> and rested on two false premises: (1) that science (the child of Christianity) was inherently



opposed to Christianity, and (2) a naïve, outdated, and exaggerated view of the truth value of science. It was an attempt to restrict our understanding of the past to one particular template, rather than objectively evaluating competing worldviews and their component theories.

In other words, as we try to understand the past, we cannot avoid issues outside science. In that light, geologic history for many years has played an evangelistic role for the worldview of naturalism. Prehistory was an icon of naturalism and a confirmation that biblical history was false. For secular man, the timescale remains a decorated hero of the so-called struggle to free the human mind from the shackles of 'superstition.'

In addition to these complexities, there are entrenched interests that wish to protect the status quo. In this case, those interests include those in academia and the movers and shakers of popular culture. Before addressing the issue of deep time, we must also understand the consequences of this secular view of history.

## **Consequences of secular geologic history**

Whether there was a vast prehistory in Earth's past is a question well worth asking because the answer has significant consequences. These can be summarized in the general statement that our identity, both as individuals and cultures, is linked to our origin and history. There are two radically different views of the past, reflecting the competing worldviews of Christianity and naturalism. The speculations of secular history present us as the end product of a timeless chance process of evolution.

Opposing that secular view is the biblical perspective. For millennia, it informed Western culture, and before that, Judaism stood opposed to the origin stories of ancient pagan religions. The Bible presents a unique worldview: one sovereign God created and maintains the cosmos. Biblical history has an elegant simplicity. God began it at Creation, watched man rebel and fall into sin and misery, provided for the redemption of men through the life and death of Jesus, and promises a coming judgment

and the re-creation of Earth as a glorious, eternal kingdom. It is inarguable that Western civilization flowed from this view of history. The West's achievements stem from its fidelity to that heritage;<sup>12</sup> just as its past troubles and present decline spring from distortions and ultimately, its rejection.

That rejection began a few short centuries ago when the worldview of Enlightenment naturalism replaced God with nature. It discarded God's will in favor of evolutionary chance. Instead of a clear origin and destiny, it saw no prospect of beginning or end. It turned from the revelation found in Genesis to the 'story' deciphered by geology from the rocks. It was a dramatic transformation. We typically don't understand the reverberations of deep time because we rarely connect the innocuous science of geology (that provides many tangible benefits) with dramatic secularization of society. Geologists are not ranting radicals; they are typically nice, well-educated, middle-class folk. They even make great heroes in disaster movies!

Geologists aren't the problem—it's the ideas underlying their discipline because the hard truth remains: how we understand the past profoundly affects the present. The secular prehistory that appeared in the mid-to-late 1700s severed culture's connection to the Bible. When that link, which had anchored Western culture to God for centuries, was cut, civilization predictably began to drift (figure 1.2). There have been numerous uncharted reefs on the 'voyage to freedom'. Suffice it to say, that replacing God with idols invariably leads to arrogance, inhumanity, and angst on an individual level and to tyranny and oppression on a societal level.<sup>13</sup>

It seems strange that rocks and geology could trigger such an impact. We know about geology from documentaries on television, movies like Jurassic Park, or the friendly rangers at Grand Canyon (figure 1.3). If you have been there, you probably think their ideas make perfect sense because it seems that you can see the history in the layers of rock—one on top of another.

That is why we must stop and realize that the argument of this book demands two things: (1) geologic history must be wrong, and (2) it must be detrimental to science, to history, and to society. The first point is the subject of the rest of the book; the second we will address now.



*Figure 1.2. Deep time cut the cable that anchored the West to its Christian past.*

The key to understanding how geologic history is detrimental is in its effect on the popular perception of the Bible. Several centuries ago, even those who were not Christians saw the Bible as generally true and reliable in its history. It provided an ethical touchstone for the West. Not anymore. The Bible has been discarded, and its history replaced by the strata, which many see as the pages of nature's history book. Rocks are clocks, tracking the progress of the past. Not just from the practice of radiometric dating, but in the sense that they have an orderly sequence—pages of a textbook of Earth history. In fact, that analogy is so common as to be almost hackneyed. But the story interpreted by secular geologists from the rocks and that told in the Bible are incompatible, despite the best efforts of many Christians over the last two centuries to integrate the two. Honesty then compels us to a choice. On one hand is

the traditional Judeo-Christian worldview. On the other is deep time, the evolution of life, and, a God who is either absent or, at best, makes cameo appearances. The two histories are different in content, in method, and in meaning. These differences are best summarized in the special term, 'prehistory', which contains the vast majority of time, de-emphasizing man and his role in Earth's past. In Christianity, man is an immortal being created in God's image. In naturalism, man is simply the current stage of evolution. Christianity offers a hope of life after death; in secularism, there is only the bleakness of the grave.



*Figure 1.3. The Grand Canyon is a theatre of geology, showing nearly a mile of strata layered upon each other, interpreted as representing hundreds of millions of years of sedimentation. Image courtesy of Carl Froede, Jr.*

We cannot underestimate the cultural chasm between the integrated past of the Bible and the prehistory/history scheme of the Enlightenment. Most churches are content to exist with a form of intellectual schizophrenia. They teach biblical history back to Abraham, but treat everything before him as myth or poetry, thinking that secular archaeology and secular geology have disproven Creation and the Flood. In doing so, they accept the dual-history scheme.

Pigeonholing prehistory under the category of science shields it from questions because few people are interested in science or willing to