

*The Creationists* by Ronald L. Numbers. 1992. Alfred A. Knopf. New York. 458 pages. \$27.50

Reviewed by Dr. David J. Rodabaugh\*

Few books on the subject of creationists can expect glowing endorsements from both evolutionists and creationists but, judging from the jacket of this book, it has precisely that. For this reason alone, it would deserve to be read. It is a scholarly book written by an evolutionist (p. xvi) who wishes to be fair in his recording of the view and activities of the creationists.

Science historian Ronald L. Numbers received a Ph.D. from the University of California at Berkeley. For this book, he received both a Guggenheim Foundation Fellowship and a National Science Foundation Scholar's Award. Numbers' interest is "scientific creationism" or "creation science." He defines this explicitly by citing the 1981 Arkansas act and notes that this is, "...essentially biblical creationism stripped of explicit references to God, Adam, and Noah..." Incidentally, he notes that a 1991 Gallup poll found that 47 per cent of the American people believe that God made man in his present form within the last ten thousand years.

The author sees flood geology as synonymous with creation science. The chief architect was George McCready Price in his book *New Geology*, (1923), whom the author erroneously states was alone in this view until 1961 when Henry M. Morris and John C. Whitcomb, Jr. published *The Genesis Flood*. Until then the prevailing views even among fundamentalists was either day-age or gap, both allowing a very old earth.

Numbers includes in his definition of science the criteria of falsifiability, testability, tentativeness, and naturalness. We should note here that the criteria of naturalness forbids any explanation that would posit a supernatural origin. *Webster's New World Dictionary* (1984, Second Edition) gives as the first definition of supernatural, "existing or occurring outside the normal experience or knowledge of man; not explainable by the known forces or laws of nature; specifically, of, involving, or attributed to God or a god." Since the big bang explanation of the origin of the universe fits this definition, then it is a supernatural explanation! No one is suggesting that this explanation is not scientific; yet, it is not 'natural.' What seems to appeal to the evolutionists is that it avoids the forbidden 'g' word!

The author had a struggle on the way to becoming an evolutionist. Raised as a Seventh-day Adventist, he was taught Price's version of the subject. He remained a confirmed strict creationist until he attended a lecture on fossil forests in Yellowstone Park. He does not tell us what was said that was so convincing but somehow he was led to believe that the earth was at least 30,000 years old. He states, "Having thus decided to follow science rather than Scripture on the subject of origins, I quickly, though not painlessly, slid down the proverbial slippery slope toward unbelief" (p. xvi). He goes on to mention that he was accurately tagged an "Agnostic" (in a deposition for the Louisiana creation-evolution trial) and that he felt uncomfortable (p. xvi). This testimony on the author's part proves that creation is indeed fundamental to Biblical Christianity. If we can't trust the first chapters of Genesis then there is no rational basis for trusting the rest of Scripture.

Not surprisingly, an entire chapter is devoted to the contributions of Price. Some of the reasons for his flood geology are related to his being an Adventist. Numbers suggests that Price may have been the greatest of the antievolutionists, though not the last as suggested by Martin Gardner in *Fads and Fallacies in the Name of Science* (1957). Price had very little formal scientific training; he studied the subject of evolution and concluded it was essentially based on geology. He reasoned that if its geology were true then the rest would seem reasonable. Price found his 'flood geology' answers in the writings of E. G. White, the founder of the Adventists. Price and other Adventists correctly reasoned that the Sabbath command required the days of creation to be literal.

Harry Rimmer, a popular opponent of evolution prior to World War II, was very strong in his support of the gap theory. He offered a financial reward to any who could find a single scientific flaw in the Bible. He was challenged in the courts and won on two occasions. Numbers asserts that one of the cases was won on the technicality that the respondent was not responding to an ad that Rimmer placed. If that is the case, then there are two things to note: The first one Numbers notes is that Rimmer could not really claim on that case to have been vindicated in the courts. The second note that Numbers does not make is a question, "Why didn't the respondent refile in response to an ad that Rimmer did place?"

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Numbers' bias peeks through in the chapter on The Religion and Science Association (RSA) where he refers to the Adventists and conservative Lutherans as reading the Scripture in a 'hyperliteral' manner (p. 106)! Apparently, within RSA, although Price and Dudley Joseph Whitney were committed to flood geology, the president of RSA, L. Allen Higley was a gap-theorist. In addition, Higley had impressive scientific credentials and was well-placed at Wheaton College. At that time, Wheaton was viewed by some as THE COLLEGE FOR FUNDAMENTALISTS. Irreconcilable differences between various views ultimately brought the downfall of RSA. It had published the first creationist journal, *Creationist*. But, it also pointed out the very real differences in the camp of the anti-evolutionists. The RSA died in 1937 after only two years.

The Deluge Geology Society (DGS) was founded in 1938 and began publishing the *Bulletin of Deluge Geology and Related Sciences*. Numbers considers this journal to have been a vast improvement over the *Creationist*. While DGS included mostly Adventists, it also attracted several nonadventists who would later be very influential in creationist circles including William J. Tinkle (1892-1981), Henry M. Morris, and Walter E. Lammerts.

Several protégés of Price are mentioned. The first, Harold W. Clark ultimately became the first Adventist with an advanced degree in biology. Price readily accepted his *Back to Creationism* (1929) even though Clark parted with Price on glaciation and suggested that hybridization led to new species. But, when Clark announced to Price that further study had convinced him that the geological column was accurate, Price was then opposed to Clark.

Another Price protégé that joined Clark in accepting microevolution within the originally created kinds was Frank Lewis Marsh (1899-1992), who earned a Ph.D. in botany. At first, Price did not much appreciate certain views of Marsh, but when Marsh and Clark had a rift, Price sided with Marsh and 'anointed' him as his successor. Some within DGS did not appreciate Marsh's thesis and felt he had succumbed too much to the evolutionists in his book *Evolution, Creation and Science* (1944). Interestingly, Dobzhansky, the famous evolutionist geneticist, considered Marsh's book to be a sensibly argued defense of special creation (p. 131). Dobzhansky did not accept Marsh's rejection of macroevolution, but did refer to him as "the only living scientific anti-evolutionist" (p. 132).

In discussing England, Numbers infers that Philip Henry Gosse originated the idea that God created the earth recently with the "appearance of age." Another apparent first was the application by Robert E. D. Clark of the second law of thermodynamics (the law of entropy) as an argument against evolution and in favor of special creation. Clark included this work in his book *Darwin: Before and After* (1948). Apparently this argument bothers Numbers for he says that Clark, "... put the entropy argument in the hands of a generation of antievolution warriors who used it with abandon—and usually without Clark's sensitivity to the scientific issues involved" (pp. 156-7). It is strange that Clark preferred membership in a society that fostered theistic evolution rather than membership in the clearly creationist Evolution Protest Movement (EPM). Apparently he was embarrassed by what he saw as lack of scholarship. He wrote of the "very strange" utterances of the president of EPM whose belief in special creation was for religious and not scientific reasons. To the reviewer, this is a troubling assertion. First, it is valid to believe something because it is right (which for some is based on their belief in God). Second, it is a matter of principle that you join with those who are right and try to move them toward a position which is more 'valid' or 'palatable.'

In 1941 the American Scientific Affiliation (ASA) was formed by evangelical scientists concerned about the quality of the Christian witness on science and religion. Numbers correctly points out that they devoted more energy to appraising than opposing evolution. As he correctly notes, they shifted from strict creationism to progressive creationism and theistic evolution. Indeed, this shift forced strict creationists to go elsewhere in the 1960s. A real problem faced the ASA over the issue of flood geology. The scientist who finally brought the issue of flood geology to a head was J. Laurence Kulp. He had moved from a six literal day gap-theory universal flood position to teaching that Genesis only taught there was a creator. Of particular importance to later developments was Kulp's opposition to a paper Henry M. Morris had submitted to the ASA. Kulp dismissed the idea of a 6000 year old earth as foolishness. Unfortunately, by 1948, many in the ASA followed Kulp. In the move toward a more liberal position, several things developed. One was the expression that they should approach evolution "not with a chip on our shoulder but in the spirit of inquiry." Another was the call by Kulp for *examining* the faith rather than *defending* the faith.

Proof of ASA's abandonment of strict creationism was provided by the publication of *Evolution and Christian Thought Today* (1959), edited by Mixter. The liberal element in the ASA regarded strict creationism as "pseudo-science" and a menace to the Christian faith. The problems within ASA spilled over to problems at Wheaton.

This caused no small concern to those who had seen Wheaton as once supporting creationism. (This reviewer lost interest in a teaching position at Wheaton because of what he perceived as duplicity on this topic.)

An influential book during this time was Bernard Ramm's *The Christian View of Science and Scripture* (1954). He attempted to steer his readers into progressive creationism. Ramm, who was close to the leaders in the ASA, saw himself as a leader among the "new evangelicals" who asserted that they had "responsible" scholarship and shunned being negative. This book was well-received by the neo-evangelicals, including Billy Graham. Ramm was particularly critical of Rimmer and Price. While Ramm's book was a solace to some, it stirred others to action. John C. Whitcomb, Jr. saw the local flood proposed in Ramm's book as "final proof of the logical absurdities to which one is driven as an evangelical by following uniformitarian geology" (p. 187). Two years later, Whitcomb devoted his Th.D. dissertation to answering Ramm and defending the position of Price. In 1957, he had completed his 450 page dissertation, "The Genesis Flood," and became interested in rewriting it for publication as a book. Eerdmans apparently succumbed to pressure from ASA to not publish it. Moody Press decided to publish it in spite of the criticism from the ASA. They did, however, feel that the book would be more effective if the scientific parts were checked or written by a Ph.D. in science. Ultimately, Henry M. Morris was to provide the scientific parts to supplement Whitcomb's theology. Moody Press apparently had second thoughts about publishing this book partly because of its insistence on literal creative days and a concern over its reception. (It is interesting to note the pressures on even conservative publishing houses, against publishing a book that we identify with the conservative viewpoint.) Through the influence of Rousas J. Rushdoony, it was published by Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company. To extend its appeal, Price is referenced only a few times and denominational affiliations of early contributors to "flood geology" are omitted.

While Numbers sees nothing new conceptually in the book, *The Genesis Flood* sold tens of thousands of copies during its first decade and provoked a furious debate among evangelicals. Strict creationists loved it while others denounced it. Numbers finds it significant that some who praised the book still accepted either a gap-theory or day-age theory, even though these approaches contradict clear implications of the book itself. To this reviewer, that is not surprising at all. Certainly, in history, one might admire a work of another while not buying all of the conclusions.

The leaders of the neo-evangelicals rejected the book. This is not really surprising. A clearly overdue ASA review questioned both its theological and scientific assumptions and called them the "Price-Morris-Whitcomb catastrophic geology" (p. 207). Numbers asserts that Whitcomb and Morris refused to be drawn into a strictly scientific debate. Instead, they insisted that the central issue was what God had revealed in His Word. They argued that presuppositions shaped conclusions and faith shaped the presuppositions of each side. Numbers agrees that the discussion involved competing cosmologies. Whitcomb and Morris asserted that both sides viewed the world through distinctive "sets of spectacles" that uniquely color everything. Mainstream scientists agreed, but insisted that science could also determine the spectacles. The scientists in ASA never did deal adequately with the issues of the scriptures.

Numbers next describes the birth of the Creation Research Society (CRS). Walter Lammerts proposed to Whitcomb the formation of an informal association of persons interested in flood geology. There was concern that it might be dominated by the Adventists or some other special interest group. Lammerts and William J. Tinkle in 1961 assembled a "Team of Ten" which became the nucleus for the CRS, which Numbers admits is the leading creationist organization of the late twentieth century. Numbers pictures Lammerts as a man with sterling scientific credentials but, in some ways, not the typical conservative Christian.

Tinkle invited eight to join his and Lammerts' effort: Henry Morris, Frank Lewis Marsh, Molleurus Couperus, Edwin Y. Monsma, R. Laird Harris, Duane T. Gish, Philip V. Livdahl, and Edward L. Kessel. Couperus had second thoughts and requested his name not be on the proposed letterhead. Kessel turned out to be a theistic evolutionist. Livdahl declined to join the group, leaving seven.

Finally, the ten, now called the Creation Research Advisory Committee included Tinkle, Lammerts, Morris, Marsh, Gish, Harris, Monsma, together with John J. Grebe (1900-1984), John W. Klotz and Wilbert H. Rusch. Five of these had doctorates in biology, one had a Ph.D. in biochemistry, and one had a master's in biology. It is interesting to note that while it took over a year to obtain this select group of ten strict creationists (fall of 1961 to February of 1963), there were fifty by the end of 1963. The CRS was formed in June 1963, and the statement of belief was adopted. Voting membership was limited to scientists having an M.S. (or equivalent) but nonscientists could join as nonvoting members.

Eight others joined as charter members: Karl W. Linsenmann (1900-1990), John N. Moore, David A. Warriner, Harold S. Slusher, Thomas G. Barnes, Willis L. Webb, Clifford Burdick, and Paul A. Zimmerman. Numbers notes that six were Missouri Lutherans, six were Baptists, and two were Seventh Day Adventists.

CRS has always emphasized education and research rather than other activities. Its emphasis has been books and journals rather than public meetings. By 1973, CRS had 1,999 members with 412 voting members; current voting membership is about 628. Early in its history, biologists George F. Howe, Bolton Davidheiser and H. Douglas Dean joined the Board. Numbers reports various matters of infighting and denominational concerns. He also reports the cooperative arrangement between CRS and the Bible Science Association, headed by the Lutheran Pastor Walter Lang.

By 1970, the terms "creation science" and "scientific creationism" were used to denote flood geology. These terms arose in a specific educational and legal climate. Nell Segraves, a mother concerned with what her children were being taught, together with Jean Sumrall petitioned the California State Board of Education that evolution be designated a theory in all state-approved biology texts. (This battle at the moment appears lost as our culture moves more toward humanism.)

Numbers admits that some of the claims made against the tactics of creationists were true as well of the evolutionists. We list a few examples: Creationists found some refuge in the definitions of science found in the dictionary and in the works of Karl R. Popper and Thomas S. Kuhn. The American scientific establishment, ignoring the fact that "science" and "religion" had often been unified, declared them separate. They asserted that evolutionists had changed their opinions while creationists had never changed their opinions. As Numbers correctly asserts, this is simply not the case.

There have been charges by non-creationists that creation scientists haven't done a good job of punishing systemic deception. Numbers asserts that there is some truth to the charges but not to the extent claimed. He also points out that some of the most telling criticisms of creation science have come from creationists and appeared in their own journals. Numbers mentions the lack of geologists among the strict creationists. He, however, lists some relative newcomers who are qualified geologists: Stephen A. Austin (Ph.D., Pennsylvania State University), Douglas A. Block (M.S., University of Iowa), Kurt P. Wise (Ph.D., Harvard).

Although Numbers is not a creationist and admits to being agnostic, his book is valuable. This reviewer hasn't been in the inner circles long enough to evaluate details he presents. But, his book gave me a tremendous sense of gratitude that I have benefited from the 1961 book by Whitcomb and Morris and the creationist revolution it spawned! And it makes me appreciate the efforts of those in any organization which supports what Numbers calls "strict creationism."

### **Bibliography**

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