

# Poor scholarship and self deception

A review of  
*The Bible, Rocks and Time:  
Geological Evidence for  
the Age of the Earth:*  
by Davis A. Young and Ralph  
F. Stearley  
IVP Academic,  
Downers Grove, IL, 2008

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Anyone not familiar with the actual *Arguments* used by advocates of young earth creation (YEC) will probably be persuaded by this book that YEC is devoid of intellectual content, retards the gospel and apologetics, and shipwrecks the faith of young Christians (see especially chapter 17). Here is a typical statement of the sorts of claims found throughout the book:

“God has placed a wealth of clues in the rocks that attest to great terrestrial antiquity. From the abundant empirical evidence that has been extracted from the rocks there is nothing that would remotely lead geologists to conclude that Earth is anything other than extremely old” (p. 475).

Here is another:

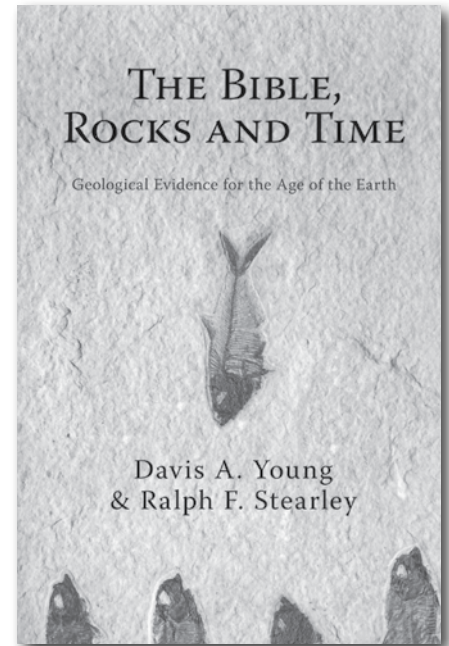
“Young-Earth creationism and Flood geology have almost nothing to do with the totality of evidence from Earth, whether chemical element distributions, sedimentary strata, fossils, magmatic activity, glaciation or metamorphism, except in the most superficial way” (p. 495).

YECs are also apparently deceptive because their claims can sound so plausible to laypersons (p. 478). They ignore data when convenient, misunderstand other data, and often misrepresent the views of mainstream geology (p. 494). Most YECs are just laypeople and pastors

that would not know anything about geology anyway (pp. 22, 162). And of course, YECs all too often quote evolutionists and uniformitarians out of context. So, with all these accusations about YECs it is no wonder that many pastors, school administrators, theologians, Bible teachers, and Christians have come to view them as ignorant, deceitful, and distorting God’s word.

As an aside, it’s popular today for mainstream geologists to refer to themselves as “actualists” rather than “uniformitarians”, but the distinction is moot. Actualists, like uniformitarians, explain Earth’s geological past in terms of natural processes extending over millions of years. They recognize that the processes we see happening today are not sufficient to explain the geological evidence. So they are prepared to invoke unobserved environments and processes, and to accept that some large catastrophes occurred during Earth history. But, like uniformitarians, they deny the reality of the globe-enveloping biblical Flood.

Returning to the accusations made by Davis and Stearley, when you hear someone making such serious claims you should ask yourself whether they may be hammering home an ideology. This is what is happening. In fact, they state their ideology up front when they explain the goal of their book: to attack and discredit YEC and convince readers on both biblical and geological grounds that the earth is billions of years old (pp. 10–11). What would you think if those who conducted this stinging critique have hardly investigated YEC at all? Or worse, that they are misrepresenting the YEC position. That appears to be the case as I will attempt to show. I suspect that the reason they do not analyze YEC arguments beyond the superficial level is because they believe that mainstream earth science is correct, not only in the



geological observations, but also in the *interpretation* of the observations. However, the real controversy is over the *interpretation* of the data and not the data itself (although interpretations are often confused with observations). The authors seem to believe *all* geological interpretations, even old age interpretations back to the 1700s, although eschewing the scientism that is rife among scientists. For a 500-page book, we should expect the authors to delve into at least a few YEC arguments in depth.

Always, and especially in such controversial issues such as origins, we should look into the YEC arguments, as Scripture tells us to do: “But examine everything *carefully*; hold fast to that which is good” (1 Thessalonians 5:21). It is not difficult for anyone these days to look up the YEC position on biblical and geological issues. The information is readily available on the internet, in hundreds of books and DVDs, and at conferences and talks held almost every week around the United States, Australia and Europe.

The authors use the *ad numerum* fallacy by stating that, “A growing number of orthodox evangelical Christian writers, including geologists, preachers, biblical scholars and theologians, accepted and accommodated their thinking to the mounting evidence of terrestrial

antiquity” (p. 120). The unstated message is that you, the reader, should too. But what does it matter what other people think? The key issue is, “Is that idea consistent with the Bible?” and that is what this book does not really address (see below).

YECs will readily admit that they do not know how some observations fit into Genesis 1–11, which I will call the Creation/Flood model. There is a definite reason for this. We have a lack of researchers, very little funds, and have been working at it for only a half-century. We have accomplished an amazing amount of research and publication in that amount of time. On the other hand, the evolutionary/uniformitarian establishment has been working diligently since the late 1700s with tens of thousands of researchers and a huge amount of government money (i.e. coerced from taxpayers). So, they have a head start. But YECs are catching up with them in the explanation of nature. The reader should examine the issue closely and keep track of future developments for himself.

### Plan of the book

The book is an extensive rewrite of Davis Young’s *Christianity and the Age of the Earth* (1982). It argues that the earth is billions of years old rather than the biblically determined 6,000 years, based not only radiometric dates but a host of processes that are assumed to operate much too slowly for a 6,000-year history. This is why the book, which focuses on the old age of the earth, dismisses Flood geology just as much as the young-age scriptural chronology. The two are intimately connected, as it was the prior rejection of the Flood that ushered in deep time. I have always found that bringing back the Flood into Earth history not only provides reasonable alternative explanation to time challenges, but also explains long standing puzzles of observational geology, such as the mysteries of the Ice Age, woolly mammoths, end Ice Age extinctions, etc.<sup>1</sup>

The book is divided into four parts. The first is an historical perspective—a good place to start. The second part deals with biblical issues, which should be the primary evidence for a Christian. The third deals with geological issues, which make up 40% of the book, not a surprise since both Young and Stearley are Ph.D. geologists. The fourth and final perspective deals with philosophical issues, which I briefly mentioned in the introduction.

The book will likely be influential in evangelical circles, unless readers grapple with the issue more seriously than Young and Stearley. Superficially it’s impressive on many counts: that both authors are connected with the ostensibly evangelical college in Grand Rapids, Michigan, that derives its name from the great reformer, John Calvin; that both authors are or were professors of geology; that the book is published by the top evangelical publisher IVP Academic; that it is 500 pages long with a subject index, Scripture index, and name index; that the text is well illustrated with photos and diagrams related to geology; and that it is endorsed by professors connected with academic evangelical institutions like Covenant Theological Seminary, Wheaton College, and Calvin Theological Seminary and by professors of geology at the University of Michigan and the University of Massachusetts.

### The church up to the “Enlightenment” did not compromise

YECs have long stated that compromises to try to fit deep time into the Bible, such as saying the days of Genesis are long periods of time, were not developed *until* the rise of “science”. Therefore, during the so-called Enlightenment, scholars were simply putting their biases into the Bible. This shows that the real meaning of Genesis 1–11 is the *traditional literal* belief, and that there are no “hidden” meanings in these versus that would support deep time, uniformitarianism, and evolution. Compromising evangelical scholars have often taken YECs to task on this claim, stating

that many of the early church fathers and those of the Reformation era saw different meanings to Genesis than the straightforward meaning, like Dr Hugh Ross, for instance, in *Creation and Time*. This is supposed to justify modern compromises with Genesis. But *Refuting Compromise*<sup>2</sup> chapter 3 conclusively refutes Ross’s claim and documents that the near universal belief of the Church Fathers and Reformers was in a young earth.

When Young and Stearley got through the history in part I, they show that practically all the Christian leaders up to and including the Reformation took Genesis literally, confirming what *Refuting Compromise* documented. A few of them added symbolic meanings, but these were *over and above* the literal meaning. Augustine had the most radical belief on the days of Genesis 1. Instead of viewing them as seven literal days, he believed the first six were only *one* day. Although Augustine’s view was aberrant (i.e. out of step with most Church Fathers), he still did not believe in an old earth or that the days of Genesis were long periods of time. Young and Stearley even chide Hugh Ross for whitewashing this evidence that compromises did not begin until the Enlightenment:

“We are unable to agree with Ross’s assessment of the views of the early church. The first quotation is incorrect because the church fathers did not believe that the days of creation were 1,000 years long, but they did believe that 1,000 years of human history corresponded to each literal day of creation [i.e. there would be only 6,000 years of human history after the creation]. The second quotation is somewhat misleading because it conveys the impression that the church fathers might have differed about the time of creation, but we have no evidence that anyone other than Origen [of Alexandria] thought the world might be older than 5,500 years [using the Septuagint]” (p. 34, square brackets mine; note that even Origen denounced belief that the earth was older than 10,000 years).



Now that we have settled that issue, we can move on and hopefully hear no more about the supposed compromising beliefs of Christian scholars up to about 1700. And by the way, this admission also indicates that YEC scholarship on this issue has been solid all along, unlike the impression that Young and Stearley give of supposedly shabby YEC scholarship.

### Examples of poor scholarship

I will wait until the end to discuss biblical issues (their part II) because it's the geological issues (part III) that really determine their conclusions on biblical issues, whereas it should be the other way around, although they attempt to deny this.

Geological issues actually are first brought up in part I under historical perspectives. Young and Stearley go through the historical development of geological discovery up to the present time. Over and over again they claim the early geological scholars were objective; they were innocently taking their observations to their logical conclusion, which was that the earth is very old. This is perhaps the biggest failing of the book. Nothing

is mentioned about the worldview change of the time. The authors do not discuss the influence of the so-called Enlightenment and its naturalistic "science", and the rebellion against the authority of the Bible that occurred starting in the 1700s. It was *after* the Flood was thrown out *a priori* that scholars saw an old earth. For instance, Young and Stearley state:

"These observations on the vertical and regional distribution of rock strata gradually led to development of a geologic timescale and an ever-growing sense of the Earth's great antiquity."

Young and Stearley are constantly sympathizing with the geological heroes of the Enlightenment, uplifting Hutton and Lyell as great paragons of reason in discovering uniformitarianism. But this is not true, as even Gould<sup>3</sup> admits. They say that some of these scholars were even Christians, leaving us the impression that their deductions did not conflict with the Bible, although these Christian scholars had previously thrown out the Flood. The dearth of references to YEC resources is apparent here in that the writings of Mortenson<sup>4,5</sup> and

Sarfati<sup>2</sup> are not even mentioned—not in the whole book. Many other YEC books and articles should have been referred to in the book but they have been ignored—an example of poor scholarship. A scholarly examination would look at all or most of the available published material on a particular argument, especially the best case for the position it attacks.

For those who attempted it, Bible-believing scholars of the time did run into difficulties relating geological observations to the Flood, but much of this was due to ignorance of, and a few wrong concepts, about the Flood. If they had held onto the Bible and the Flood at the time, I am sure these geological issues would eventually have resolved themselves. For instance, one wrong belief of the 1700s and 1800s, which the authors also believe and which persists widely to this day, is that the Flood was so chaotic that sedimentary layers would be rare. They thought that fossils and sediments should be mixed up into a confusing mess. The Flood was of course violent at times and places, but there would be a definite order to the processes that took place during the Flood year. Also, water flowing over



**Figure 1.** Grand Canyon is one of the best places in the world to see over 1,200 m of rapidly deposited Flood layers over a large area. Because of shifting and slowing currents, and particles of different mass, shape and density, layers formed quickly. Arrow shows the Coconino Sandstone near the top.

a large area would produce its own pattern of sedimentation and there would be calmer areas for deposition. Furthermore, the work of Berthault<sup>6</sup> shows that layering of sediments happens automatically when particles of different mass, shape, and density are deposited from a moving fluid—information not even considered in the book. The Flood was much more complicated than the simple ideas of many of its critics, including Young and Stearley.

It is also interesting that in the historical part, Young and Stearley briefly mention the rise of the “higher” Bible critics and analyze many of the compromise ideas with Genesis 1–11. The net result was a great weakening of the authority of Scripture that went hand in hand with throwing out the Flood and “seeing” an old earth. Evolution soon followed in the mid 1800s, adding more Church and cultural confusion. Probably millions lost their professed faith.<sup>7</sup> Young and Stearley do not seem to understand the connection between these parallel changes in secular geology and the weakening of the Church. Could it be the great weakening of the Church is because the Enlightenment rebellion had also crept *into* the Church, starting with assuming that the earth is old?

### Geological misrepresentations

A series of books could be written countering the numerous geological errors and misrepresentations in this book. In fact, one volume has already been written to provide answers to about a dozen common misrepresentations of the Flood.<sup>8</sup> Although some observational data are difficult to explain in the Flood model, I have found that an examination of Flood challenges often shows that the same challenge is *also* a challenge to uniformitarianism and actualism, as shown by the example of the desert paleoenvironment discussed below. Furthermore, a good number of these challenges already have reasonable answers within the Flood model, but Young and Stearley do not seem to be aware of them. It appears that they have hardly examined the issues

at all, and therefore are guilty of poor scholarship. Or else, they are aware of YEC answers but since they do not have good rebuttals, they ignore them—an example of poor intellectual integrity. There are very few creationist references, as stated already. And when there are, the authors frequently use old sources, taking George McCready Price and Whitcomb and Morris to task. How long ago did Price enter into eternity? It seems like they are sometimes just retelling old war stories. And when they do cite modern YEC works, such as the RATE books,<sup>9–11</sup> they do not even attempt to refute any of the data in these books, but simply dismiss the books as against their paradigm. They do not discuss or attempt to critique Humphrey’s helium diffusion data, Baumgardner’s <sup>14</sup>C data in coal and diamonds, or Snelling’s radiohalo data. One must wonder if they have even read the books they cite.

Young and Stearley refer to the Ice Age in several spots in the book, even citing my popular level book.<sup>1</sup> However, they seem not to have read

the book or any of my other books and articles on the Ice Age, which have been published during the past 30 years. For instance, they state:

“If one is inclined to attribute these fossiliferous rocks to the action of Noah’s Deluge, then one must deal with the fact that glacial deposits are more recent than the Deluge” (p. 426).

The authors think that an ice age after the Flood is something we have not dealt with, and it would be a challenge to our model. But a post-Flood Ice Age has been the standard belief of YEC for well over 50 years! This is another example of such poor scholarship that no YEC or Christian should take this book seriously.

Although there are legitimate challenges to the Creation/Flood model, many of the authors’ geological challenges have reasonable creationist answers. I will mention only one more geological challenge that the authors believe demonstrates uniformitarianism and deep time. These are “desert deposits”, especially



**Figure 2.** Closeup of the contact between the Coconino Sandstone and the subjacent Hermit Shale below (arrow) looking southwest from near the North Rim Lodge. Ten million years is missing at this widespread, dead flat contact.



in the southwest United States (pp. 304–308). Of course, the authors accept the typical uniformitarian paleoenvironmental deduction of an ancient desert (they appear to accept all uniformitarian paleoenvironmental interpretations). However, they do not see the evidence against such an environment. For instance, many of the sandstone units, such as the Coconino Sandstone, are bounded by flat surfaces on the top and bottom. How many desert environments have such flat surfaces for over two hundred miles? When one considers that the sedimentary rocks above and below these sandstone bodies are usually marine, the idea of a regression or transgression leaving a flat surface is strongly against uniformitarianism, and against actualism for that matter. There are also planation surfaces within the cross-bedded sandstones. These flat surfaces are unlike any desert environment on Earth. There is a huge problem of the source of the sand. Also, there are 10 million years of missing time at the flat lower contact of the Coconino Sandstone with the Hermit Shale. How could a contact remain so flat over such a large area in that amount of time? So, there are multiple uniformitarian problems with the desert environment, before we even consider a Flood mechanism. This goes to show that uniformitarian challenges to Flood geology are also challenges to uniformitarianism. The authors' one-sided analysis of desert sandstones is typical of the simplistic analysis of other geological "challenges" in this book.

### General comments on geological deductions

The geological part of the book especially brought home to me that the authors do not seem to distinguish between observation and interpretation. They seem to think that their uniformitarian *interpretations* are just as factual. No wonder they do not believe in the global Flood and accept deep time. For instance, the authors state:

"Science is not going to abandon the cell theory of biology, the existence of the electromagnetic spectrum, the data about the rotation and revolution periods of Mars, or the basic principles of electronics. These matters are firmly established on an abundance of critical evidence. The antiquity of the Earth falls into that category" (p. 173).

They even have the gall to say that all this supposed evidence for old age was created by God. These authors appear to be under the delusion that geological interpretations are the same as observational physics. This is another reason why I have included "self deception" in the title.

They also criticize creationists for supposedly having an old view of uniformitarianism and that we are challenging a straw man concept (pp. 230–234). They claim YECs are ignorant that most geologists believe in actualism, which allows a few catastrophes, such as the Lake Missoula flood and meteorite impacts. Actually, the authors present a straw man of Flood geology, since practically all Flood geologists are aware of actualism and neocatastrophism. The problem here is that neocatastrophism was a *later* development, starting with the Lake Missoula flood. The neocatastrophists came to this conclusion kicking and screaming. This is demonstrated by the fact the Lake Missoula flood was automatically rejected for 40 years by practically all geologists because it was too catastrophic.<sup>12</sup> The history of the Lake Missoula flood shows that they accepted a few catastrophes only when they were forced to accept them by overwhelming evidence. Other than a few catastrophes, uniformitarian belief in present processes is still the main paradigm.

The authors also criticize creationists for failing to recognize that evolution was not used in setting up the geological column, since evolution was not widely accepted until the mid and late 1800s. Although technically true, the concept of "fossil succession" had come into vogue well before Darwin published his famous book and was used to set up the

geological column. Whether recognized as evolution or not, fossil succession was still a fossil change in time, which differs from evolution in name only.

### Biblical compromise

Now I return to their earlier Part II on biblical perspectives, mainly because it is obvious that their geological views drive their attitude toward the Bible. The authors admit that the literal meaning is the most natural reading, and was the traditional reading up until the 1700s. Why then do they castigate YECs who are simply following the Bible as best they can?

But the authors go on and say that we must be "open" to "new" meanings. They then rationalize away practically every plain historical statement in Genesis 1–9, especially denying that the Bible says God created our earth in six normal-length days some 6,000 years ago. They justify this dismissal of the plain, traditional reading of Genesis by saying that the Bible uses phenomenological language when referring to sunrise and sunset, and that we must interpret the Bible in view of the culture of the time. They do not even attempt to consider the obvious meaning of the Hebrew word *yom* as a 24-hour period based on the hermeneutics of the word with a number and "evening and morning" in the rest of the Hebrew Old Testament. Instead, they nit-pick over the slight differences in the use of the adjectives in each of the seven days, that the sun was not around to define the first three days, the slightly different use of the numerical adjective attached to *yom*,<sup>13</sup> and the different adjectives applied to the seventh day,<sup>14</sup> all refuted in the footnoted articles and by *Refuting Compromise*.<sup>2</sup>

Their rationalization even extends to the New Testament in that they dismiss Romans 5:12 as saying physical death came on the earth because of Adam's sin. In this passage, Paul clearly contrasts a real historical Adam and the bodily death he brought, with Jesus and His bodily Resurrection from the dead.<sup>15</sup> This passage is enough to refute long ages,<sup>16</sup> since undoubted

*Homo sapiens* have been “dated”, by methods these authors accept, to well beyond any possible date for Adam.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, the animals in the Garden of Eden, like man, were vegetarian (Genesis 1:29–30),<sup>18</sup> and the effects on the physical world parallel the Fall and redemptive history of man (Romans 8:19–22).<sup>19</sup>

The authors do not commit to any one “reinterpretation”: “We have not attempted to provide a comprehensive interpretation of Genesis 1. Nor have we tried to defend the gap theory, the day-age theory, the revelation-day theory, the intermittent-day theory, the analogical-day theory or the framework theory” (p. 210). Of the six alternate views, the authors are not prepared to defend any of them. Prominent theologian R. C. Sproul, in his commentary on the Westminster Confession,<sup>20</sup> likewise discusses the various alternative interpretations but at least he is prepared to give an assessment of them. And he concludes that none of the compromises works, if you are going to take the Bible seriously. He said that he once believed that the framework hypothesis was the most hopeful and held onto that for most of his teaching career, but he now no longer believes it is workable. He now accepts that the only viable way of reading the Bible is with the literal 6-day view.<sup>21</sup>

Although Young and Stearley have written a 500-page book, they believe that the issue of deep time is not that important and it does not matter what one believes: “We have also concluded that the Bible is not concerned about the age of the Earth at all. The Bible leaves it up to humans to try to figure out how old the Earth is, if that is a question that interests us” (p. 210). To get to this point, the authors have had to “reinterpret” a lot of Scripture from both the Old and New Testaments. We cannot say that changing the plain meaning of Genesis, such as the genealogies from Adam<sup>22</sup> along with Jesus’ statements indicating little time from the creation to Adam,<sup>23</sup> is unimportant. The importance especially relates to how we interpret other plain meanings of Scripture. One could

easily substitute the Resurrection or other straightforward statements of Jesus into the author’s rationalizations of Genesis 1–9 and end up denying any doctrine of the Bible. Is it any wonder that sceptics accuse us of supporting almost any belief from the Bible? Such intellectual gymnastics only work of course when you use eisegesis (reading into the text) and not exegesis (reading out of the text). The authors employ the former. Despite all their eisegesis, the authors even have the gall to claim they believe in biblical inerrancy (p. 181). We only need to look at the state of the Church since the 1700s to understand that “reinterpreting” the Bible to make it fit with human ideas has serious consequences.

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