

Uniformitarianism, Part 1

Scripture: Job 34:15

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The hypothesis that the earth is billions of years old is rooted in the unbiblical premise that what is happening now is just what has always happened. This idea is known as uniformitarianism. It is the theory that natural and geological phenomena are for the most part the results of forces that have operated continuously, with uniformity, and without interruption, over billions and billions of years. Uniformitarians assume that the forces at work in nature are essentially fixed and constant. Scientists who hold this view explain nearly all geological phenomena in terms of processes that are still occurring. The uniformitarian sees sedimentary rock strata, for example, and assumes that the sediments that formed them resulted from the natural, slow settling of particles in water over several million years. A uniformitarian observes the Grand Canyon and assumes the natural flow of the Colorado River carved that immense chasm over many ages with a steady (though constantly decreasing) stream.

Uniformitarianism was first proposed around the beginning of the nineteenth century by two British geologists, James Hutton and his best-known disciple, Charles Lyell. Lyell's work *Principles of Geology* was an explicit rejection of creation and flood-based explanations for geological formulations. Lyell insisted that all the features of earth's geology must be explainable by natural, rather than supernatural, processes. He regarded all biblical or supernatural explanations as inherently unscientific and therefore false. In other words, he began with the presupposition that Scripture itself is untrue. And his work essentially canonized atheistic naturalism as the basis for "scientific" research.

As we have noted previously, naturalism itself is a religious belief. The conviction that nothing happens supernaturally is a tenet of faith, not a fact that can be verified by any scientific means. Indeed, an a priori rejection of everything supernatural involves a giant, irrational leap of faith. So the presuppositions of atheistic naturalism are actually no more "scientific" than the beliefs of biblical Christianity. That obvious fact seems to have escaped Lyell and many who have followed him.

Nonetheless, Lyell's uniformitarian theory was enormously influential on other scientists of his age. (Darwin even took a copy of Lyell's work with him when he sailed on the *Beagle* in 1831.) And from the first publication of Lyell's work until today, the hypothesis that the earth is ages old has dominated secular science. The theory of evolution itself was the predictable and nearly immediate result of Lyell's uniformitarian hypothesis.

Of course, modern scientists have expanded their estimates of the age of the earth beyond anything Lyell himself ever imagined. But the basic theory of uniformitarianism first emerged from Lyell's antibiblical belief system.

The opposite of uniformitarianism is catastrophism, the view that dramatic geological changes have occurred in sudden, violent, or unusual events. A catastrophist observing sedimentary rock formations or large canyons is more likely (and more accurately) to interpret them as the result of

massive flooding. Of course, this yields a much younger time frame for the development of earth's geological features. (A sudden flood, for example, can produce a thick layer of sediment in a few hours. That means a large stratum of sedimentary rock, which a uniformitarian might assume took millions of years to form, could actually be the result of a single flash flood.) Catastrophism therefore poses a major challenge to the evolutionary timetable, eliminating the multiple billions of years demanded to make the evolutionary hypothesis work. And for that reason it is rejected out of hand by most evolutionists.

But a moment's reflection will reveal that the fossil record is impossible to explain by any uniformitarian scheme. For a living creature to become fossilized (rather than to decay and turn to dust—Job 34:15), it must be buried immediately under a great weight of sediment. Apart from a catastrophic deluge on a scale unlike any observed in recent history, how can we explain the existence of massive fossil beds (such as the Karoo formation fossil field in Africa, which is thought to hold eight hundred billion vertebrate fossils)? Natural sedimentation over several ages cannot explain how so many fossils came to be concentrated in one place. And every inhabited continent contains large fossil beds where millions of fossilized species are found together in large concentrations, as if all these creatures were destroyed and buried together by massive flooding. Fossils of sea creatures are even found on many of the world's highest mountain tops. How do uniformitarians explain such phenomena? The only way they can: They constantly increase their estimate of the age of the earth.

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