# British scriptural geologists in the first half of the nineteenth century: part 6. Thomas Gisborne (1758–1846)

**Terry Mortenson**

**Thomas Gisborne was a highly respected and nationally influential evangelical Anglican minister in early nineteenth century Britain. He was also a gifted writer and a knowledgable student of plant and animal life. Although he did not personally investigate the geological features of the earth, his writings show an accurate understanding of the leading geological books and journal articles of his day. He was not opposed to the study of geology or the confirmed facts of its investigations. But he firmly opposed the old-earth interpretation of those facts, because such theories were irreconcilable with Scripture, and because the geological facts were capable of alternative, more logical interpretations consistent with a literal understanding of Genesis 1–11, as he sought to demonstrate.**

## Biographical sketch[1]

Thomas Gisborne was born on October 31, 1758, the first child of John and Ann Gisborne. His father was a private gentleman of Derby. Thomas was educated for six years under Rev. John Pickering and then attended Harrow in 1773. At the age of 18, he entered St John's College, Cambridge, graduating with a B.A. in 1780 as sixth wrangler and first chancellor's medallist. He received his M.A. in 1783.[2]

Gisborne had the opportunity to pursue a political career but instead chose to become a clergyman in the Church of England. After taking orders in 1782, he became the perpetual curate of Barton-under-Needwood in 1783. He married Mary in 1784 and they had six (or seven) sons and two daughters.[3] His fourth son, James, replaced him as curate of Barton-under-Needwood in 1820. Gisborne was appointed as the fifth prebend in Durham in 1823, which three years later was changed to first prebend.

Gisborne was highly respected in his own lifetime. Not only did he excel as a preacher but he was also recognised as a writer, poet, moralist, natural philosopher and divine — considered '*one of the greatest geniuses of the age*'.[4] He was no doubt influenced in his writings by his intimate friendships with a number of prominent evangelicals, such as William Wilberforce, the leading force in the abolition of slavery in the UK, whom Gisborne met while at college.[5]

Gisborne wrote thirteen books, many of which went through several editions (two were translated into Welsh and German).[6] They had a wide circulation in their day and were said to have *'exercised a beneficial influence on the upper and middle classes of society'*.[7] They covered such topics as moral philosophy; the abolition of slavery;[8] the duties of men in the middle and higher classes; the duties of women; poetry; theology (including two books of sermons); and ecclesiology. Two of his books related to science: *Testimony of Natural Theology to Christianity* (1818) and *Considerations on Modern Theories of Geology* (1837).

In this study, we concentrate our attention on Gisborne's 61-page *Considerations on Modern Theories of Geology*, because it reflects his most matured and focused thoughts on the subject of geology.[9]

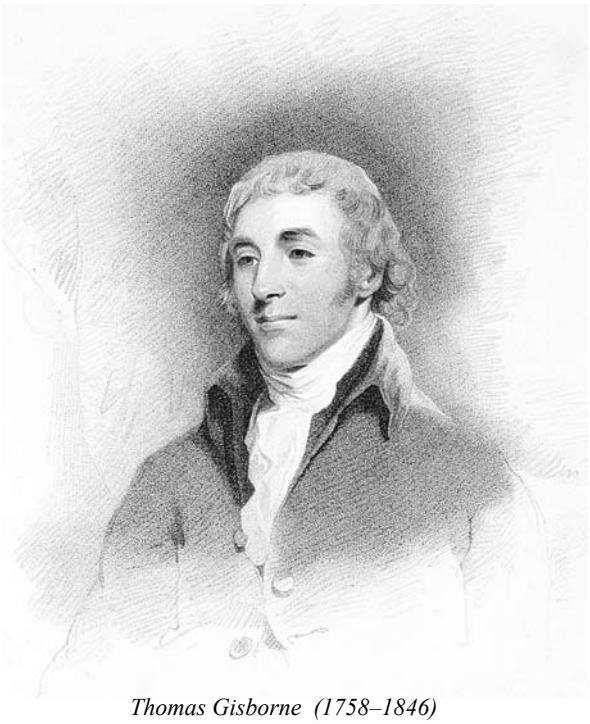
## Geological competence and attitude to geology

Gisborne was not, and never claimed to be, a geologist. Nevertheless, he was informed of the evidence and arguments for contemporary geological theories, to which he was responding in his writing.[10] The footnotes in his book indicated Gisborne's extensive reading that he used to accurately summarise the geological theory of the earth dominant in 1837. Gisborne argued against many of the geological theories of his time. However, he always explicitly acknowledged geological facts and showed respect for the scientific attainments of the authors of these theories.[11] For example, when contesting old-earth geologists' use of shells to date the strata, he first cited Cuvier's note of caution and then, though acknowledging the geological facts, offered an alternative interpretation:

> *'Still, however, geologists will maintain that particular classes of shells and of other organic bodies prevail characteristically in the chalk stratum, and others in other strata. The general fact, taken in conjunction with the acknowledged and extremely numerous irregularities and diversities in different localities, is not denied. And it accords with the established analogy of providential appointments on the surface of the earth.*[12] *When we observe particular animals and plants mainly assigned to extensive calcareous districts, others to arid and*

*sandy tracts, others to cold and rocky elevations; is it not reasonable to suppose that marine animals may select for their permanent habitations at the bottom of the ocean, some species wide expanses of chalk, others of sand, others of stony materials, according to their several natures and preferences? But these selections, were they much more extensively regular than they are ascertained to be, would not have any bearing on the theoretical question of time. They might all be contemporaneous in their commencement. Or there might be centuries of difference in their origin. The 1656 years [from Creation to the Flood] would more than abundantly contain them all. Not the slightest discrepancy exists between the cases stated and the Mosaic narrative.'* [13]

Despite what he deemed to be bad theories, Gisborne viewed geology as a worthy subject of study and potentially of great benefit to the Christian faith, not least as a witness to the existence and nature of God. And, although he rejected the theories of leading geologists, he was emphatic that he was not in any way calling into question their professed belief in Christianity.[14]



*Thomas Gisborne (1758–1846)*

## The relation between Scripture and geology

Gisborne believed that the Christian geologist had a duty not to forget his faith when doing geological study and theorising. He was free to theorise all he wanted, but must continually bring those theories to the scriptural record to see '*whether that record can be shown to be capable of a fair and reasonable interpretation consistent with his theory'*. If the theory cannot be reconciled to such an interpretation then the Christian geologist '*must ultimately relinquish his theory or his Bible. He will not doubt where the error lies'*.[15]

Gisborne countered opposition to his fundamentalist approach by arguing that all theories needed to be evaluated in light of Moses' words in Genesis.[16] Genesis, he said, contained the truth about Creation and could not be interpreted as a myth or even allegorically; it applied to the Fall; the Flood; and prophetic visions of the apocalypse.[17] To those Christian geologists who intimated that literal interpreters of the Bible ought to make some compensation to geologists for the help they give to confirming religious truth, Gisborne was firm but temperate in his response:

*'To the benefit of any justifiable interpretation, though different from that which has hitherto been received, of the Mosaic record, geologists are entitled without paying for it. Of the original interpretation, if believed to be the truth, not an atom can be relinquished on the principle of barter.'* [18]

## Summary of his argument

Gisborne's thesis was that the geological facts are consistent with what he would call *'the fair and natural interpretation'* of early chapters of Genesis: a literal six-day Creation, followed about 1656 years later, by a global, year-long, catastrophic deluge at the time of Noah. Gisborne attempted to defend his thesis by first presenting (in pages 11–23) what the leading geologists believed. He accurately stated the current dominant theory about the formation of the strata of the earth over the course of millions of years and primarily before the recent creation of man.[19] He explained geologists' general belief in the progression of life represented in the fossil record, but also documented Lyell's dissent from the majority view and Buckland's admission of fossil evidence of retrocession (that is, many cases of complex, higher forms of life being buried in strata lower than those containing simpler forms).

Gisborne documented from the writings of Cuvier, Buckland, Lyell, Conybeare and Phillips their belief in a very old earth and their use of both the seemingly regular order of the superposition of the strata and the fossils they contained. But he also cited Cuvier's and Buckland's admissions of the problems associated with these dating methods, particularly in regards to the gradual transitions between the strata and the difficulty of using imprecisely classified shells to date strata.

Finally, he set forth and briefly responded to the nebular hypothesis for the origin of the earth. This he considered to be pure speculation, which was impossible to demonstrate geologically or to reconcile with Genesis.

From this overview of the leading features of the dominant geological theory, Gisborne proceeded to show how three major geological facts were consistent with Genesis. Those three facts were:

1. the absence of organic remains in the primitive rocks of the earth, which were formed under water,
2. the presence of such fossils (many of now known creatures) in the transition, secondary and tertiary strata, and
3. the absence of human fossils in those strata.

The first fact Gisborne documented from Cuvier and

Buckland. He argued that this was precisely what we should expect from the description of the Creation in Genesis. The initially created *'globe of terrene and aqueous particles, mingled in confusion and commotion'* would naturally, under the laws of gravity, instantly begin to precipitate strata on the universal ocean bottom. This process would not only produce fossil-free sediments during the first two days of Creation before land and plants appeared, but Gisborne reasoned it would continue in much of the ocean bottoms even after life was created because it would be some time before significant amounts of plant and animal debris would be swept into the oceans. Furthermore, these sedimentary deposits under the weight and compression of the upper beds would quickly indurate. In support of this assumption, he cited a number of examples: the rapid solidification in the cooling of liquid metals and the rapid crystallisation of metallic and other neutral salts; the almost instantaneous induration of gypseous and calcareous substances to make plaster and mortar; the rapid encrustation of objects lying in a stream of petrifying water; and of flint deposits from boiling geysers.[20]

The second major fact, to which Gisborne responded, was the vast fossiliferous strata.[21] Cuvier and Buckland had documented the indefinite gradual transitions from one stratum to the next and acknowledged the uncertainties attending the dating of the formations by their relative superposition and the fossils they contained. Gisborne attributed the fossil-bearing strata both to the 1656 years between Creation and the Flood and to the Flood itself. The raising of land on the third day of Creation would have produced agitation of the waters and movements in the earth's crust, causing earthquakes and volcanoes, that would have persisted through the years leading up to the Flood and would have been augmented greatly during the Flood. During the 1656 antediluvian years immense amounts of shells and bones, mostly of marine creatures, would have been continually deposited in the ever-accumulating soft sediments on the ocean bottoms. These would eventually become the transition strata.[22] To support this inference Gisborne documented from Pennant, Buckland, Lamarck and Jameson's *Edinburgh Philosophical Journal* present day examples of the incalculable numbers and rapid rate of reproduction of various sea creatures (shellfish, cod, herring, pilchards, lobsters and corals). The majority of the higher strata Gisborne attributed to the Flood, which we will consider later.

*William Buckland (1784–1856)*

Gisborne believed it was rash for Cuvier and others to speak of extinctions. He cited, as examples of their rashness, the then great ignorance of scientists regarding life in the depths of the sea and land animals living in central Asia and America.[23] He also noted that some kinds of creatures may have served their divine purpose in the beginning years and were not chosen by God to survive the Flood.

In dealing with the second great fact of the fossiliferous sedimentary rocks, Gisborne also responded to the popular day-age and gap theories. He rejected the day-age theory because, firstly, the Sabbath commandment in Exodus 20:11 made it clear that the six days of Creation were like the seventh day of rest: all literal 24-hour days. Secondly, even if the days of Genesis 1 were taken figuratively, the order of events in Genesis 1 could not be harmonised with the dominant geological theory. Gisborne asked, if the first four 'days' covered millions of years before any fish, birds or land animals were created, then where does the geologist get the organic relics for his multiple revolutions? Or did the plants created on the third 'day' flourish for millions of years before the sun became visible and even longer before a single animal existed to enjoy them? And birds and fish were created on 'day' five before a single land animal existed to provide bones to be fossilised in the strata of that period of revolutions. Finally, Gisborne argued, not until the sixth 'day,' the epoch of the creation of man, did a single land animal come into being.

Unlike the preceding argument, Gisborne's refutation of the gap theory was primarily geological. He prefaced his remarks with these words:

> *'Dr. Buckland, speaking of the interpretation of the Mosaical days as great periods, to which, in his opinion, there is no sound critical or theological objection; observes, that "there will be no necessity for such extension in order to reconcile the text of Genesis with physical appearances, if it can be shown that the time indicated by the phenomena of Geology may be found in the undefined interval following the announcement of the First day."*[24] *In the same manner I would remark, that there will be no necessity*

*Baron Georges Cuvier (1769–1832)*

> *for speculating on any supposed interval between the first and the following verses of Genesis, if the time indicated by the phenomena of Geology may be found simply within the period beginning with the first of the Six Days, all literally understood in their ordinarily received signification, and ending with the descent of Noah from the Ark.'*[25]

He then proceeded to explain how all the geological phenomena could fit with such a literal reading of Genesis, which is the argument we have already considered above.

The third fact of geology was the lack of human fossils in the lower strata of the earth. From this, it was inferred by the old-earth geologists that the strata were formed over millions of years before man existed. Gisborne asked the Christian geologists who held this view and yet still believed in a universal Noachian Flood,[26] why geologists had found no human fossil bones, as they had elephant and rhinoceros bones, in those deposits that were laid down by the Flood. Quoting Cuvier, Gisborne said human bones preserve as well as animal bones in the same conditions. So where were they? Both Cuvier and Conybeare had explained this, as quoted by Gisborne, by the small, localised antediluvian human population. Relying on a letter from his friend, Rev. Temple Chevallier, professor of mathematics at the University of Durham, Gisborne argued that the number of people on the earth at the time of the Flood would have been in the tens of billions. Added to this was the fact that places where man had supposedly lived in early years had not been examined. So he concluded:

> *'The absence of human relics in the strata containing other organised remains, affords neither argument nor presumption in support of the theory that man did not exist until after the formation of those strata: as there is an equal absence of human relics in the diluvial strata confessedly formed many ages after the creation of mankind.'*[27]

Gisborne ended his book with a lengthy discussion of the Flood. First, however, he reminded the reader of present-day transport and depositional processes. During the antediluvian period, processes like the Gulf Stream and the stupendous rivers of Asia and America, and the world's lesser streams, combined with disruptive processes, such as volcanoes, most probably laid down a considerable amount of stratified sediments. These sometimes intermingled with vegetable remains that would later become coal deposits.[28] Nevertheless, in Gisborne's view, the complexity, violence and duration of the Noachian Flood would generate most of the geological record. He envisioned the effects this way:

> *'They may be contemplated with regard to the operations of the waters, partly during their advance, partly during their retirement. Many kindred results would take place from the beginning to the end of the Flood: but there would be processes and consequences belonging in some measure specially to each portion of the general period.*
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> *During the rise of the Deluge over the earth, while earthquakes and explosions of potency surpassing the calculations of man were rending and lifting up the basin of "the great deep"; mountains, frequently loaded with marine organisations, would be elevated with every degree of angular slopes and abruptnesses to constitute the present pinnacles of the Alps, the Andes, and the Himalayas. Inferior hills, vallies, plains would be formed, and repeatedly perhaps formed afresh, by reiterated impulses. By incessant currents, fluctuations, and vicissitudes of the waters agitated by commotions from beneath and driven in every changing direction; strata of various substances, thicknesses, and dimensions, some replete with marine exuviae, others with fresh water deposits from lakes and rivers and marshes, might alternately be accumulated one above another, within a short period, and with continual diversity and irregularity as to superposition. Then would come, borne on the waves, the interminable extent of uprooted forests to be ultimately entangled in the oozy soil, and to settle, bed above bed at intervals, with earthy and stony layers intervening, and to be with other marine formations already noticed, the fuel of a large portion of the globe, the source of individual comfort, and of the temporal prosperity of nations.*[29] *Plants and trees from the equator and from the tropics would be impetuously transported by the billows into cold countries, mixed there with the dislodged productions of those lands, and blended together in*

*the soft strata with marine relics, in the combined and varied admixtures so frequently discovered at this day. The buoyant bodies also of animals, inhabitants of whatever parts of the earth, would be hurried over the waters to the most remote regions and the most opposite climates, and left there either on the surface, or washed into cavities and fissures, as memorials of these tremendous convulsions. Such would be among the characteristics of the five months during which the Deluge was establishing its dominion over the earth.*

*In the corresponding period of its decline it would be scarcely less potent in its effects. Contemplate the immense volumes of waters rushing from the summits of the highest mountains, and progressively from every inferior elevation, to the sea, sweeping before them without limit the new and yielding strata;*[30] *many of the beds consisting of marine materials and organised remains which had been recently flung up to the loftiest peaks and spread over every minor altitude; others, composed of fresh water deposits and organisations; others, of earthly substances of separate or commingled descriptions; others of accumulated vegetation and overthrown and congregated forests. Have not we here in action an additional trains of causes and forces adequate to the production during the period of the Deluge of every arrangement, every alternation, every irregularity and rupture, every superposition and agglomeration of strata of whatever kinds; for the deepest and the most extensive denundations [*sic*]; for the breaking down of crags and precipices; for the transportation of enormous blocks to remote distances; for the grinding of fragments into sand, or rounding them into boulders and pebbles by rolling and collision; for forming successive beds of coal divided by earthy and strong layers of all varieties in thickness and dimensions; causes and forces adequate to complete the explication of all the phenomena brought into notice by geological researches?'*[31]

Like other scriptural geologists of that period, Gisborne stressed that the Flood was not simply a natural catastrophe that happened to occur at the time of Noah. Rather, the Deluge resulted from Divine judgement and was attended by miracles, though many natural processes were also at work during that yearlong event. He believed it was a foretaste of another future, miraculous, penal infliction coming upon the earth at the return of Christ. But he was not quick to invoke miracles in his explanation. He wrote:

*'We are not to resort to miraculous interference for the prompt solution of every insulated difficulty which geological phenomena may present. Insulated difficulties occur in every line of scientific inquiry. They are a part of the lot of man, and of the exercise and exemplification of his patience, his humility, and his faith. But the Deluge was as direct and special an interposition of Divine power as the Creation.*[32] *Each of the forces employed during the Deluge, while working under the general laws and properties which God had impressed upon it, was specially impelled and guided by miraculous control, so as should best accomplish his wise and holy purposes. This stupendous interposition is as strongly characterised as such in the New Testament by St. Peter as another more awful interposition, yet future, which he prophetically announces. The two events are placed by the Apostle one by the other as in their origin and in their nature exactly parallel.'*[33]

## Conclusion

As a clergyman, Gisborne was not totally ignorant in natural history and geology, due to his extensive reading and own observations in his rural parish. He was not opposed to geological study or facts for, among other benefits, these were an asset in natural theology. Gisborne sought to evaluate the logic of the inferences drawn from the geological facts, as these inferences were used to develop the old-earth theories of pre-Adamite earth history (whether catastrophist or uniformitarian). In his criticisms of these theories he did not resort to *ad hominem* attacks against the leading geologists. On the contrary, he frequently expressed his respect for their scientific and intellectual attainments.

Gisborne reasoned old-earth theories were in opposition to Scripture and undermined its authority and reliability — irrespective of the motives and intentions of the authors of those theories. He was not convinced by old-earth geological arguments that he should abandon what to him was the clear teaching of Scripture. He believed in a recent (c. 6000 years), six 24-hour-day Creation and a global catastrophic Noachian Deluge, which by its nature would have produced most of the strata of the earth's crust.

Christian convictions seem to have been the driving force in his life, though he also had a passion for philosophical and scientific truth. The income from the many editions of his other books; the character assessments of his contemporaries; and his stable ecclesiastical position seem to rule out any financial or ecclesiastical motive for writing on geology at the age of 79. And although he was a close friend of the MP, William Wilberforce, he does not appear to have been politically minded.

## References

1. Unless otherwise noted, this information is taken from the Dictionary of National Biography on Gisborne.
2. *The British Gallery of Contemporary Portraits*, **I**: no page number, 1822.
3. Obituary, *Gentlemen's Magazine*, N.S. Vol. XXV:643–45, 1846. Two of his sons became Members of Parliament. This obituary says he had seven sons, in contrast to the *DNB* article which only numbered six.
4. Overton, J.H., *The English Church in the Nineteenth Century: 1800–1833*, p. 74, 1894. *The British Gallery*, noted above, included portraits of 144 royalty, military and political leaders and prominent people in

literature, science and art in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century. These people (of whom one was Gisborne) were chosen for their '*most striking characters*' and '*the honours they have accumulated on their country, or the benefits they have conferred on Mankind*' (preface).

5. Wilberforce, S., *Life of William Wilberforce*, p. 84, 1868.
6. See bibliography, Mortenson, T.J., *British Scriptural Geologists in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century*, Doctoral Thesis, Coventry University, 1996.
7. *Imperial Dictionary of Universal Biography*, **II**:639–40, 1865.
8. Gisborne, T., *Remarks on the late decision of the House of Commons respecting the abolition of the Slave Trade,* 1792. Here Gisborne argued firmly against the parliamentary bill which called for the gradual, rather than immediate, abolition of slave trade.
9. Gisborne, T., *Considerations on Modern Theories of Geology*, 1837; hereafter it will be cited simply as *Considerations*.
10. Buckland said that Gisborne's *Natural Theology* (1818) contained many geological errors, though he did not give one specific example: see Buckland, *Vindiciae Geologicae,* p. 35, 1820. Instead, Buckland referred his readers to the anonymous critical review of Gisborne in the *Quarterly Review*, **XXI**:41–63, 1819. According to Leroy Page, the reviewer was Thomas Dunham Whitaker, a non-geologist clergyman. See Page, Diluvialism and its critics, *Towards a History of Geology*, ed. Cecil J. Schneer, p. 265, footnote 33, 1969. So the geologist, Buckland, relied on the non-geologist, Whitaker, to assert that Gisborne did not have his geological facts straight. It is true that Whitaker made some vague accusations of error and vociferously opposed Gisborne's interpretations of the facts. But I searched the review in vain for one *specific* example of an error regarding established geological *facts* (in contradistinction to the geological *theories*, which Gisborne rejected.)
11. The title of his 1837 book itself emphasized this.
12. By this he meant that creatures inhabit different ecological and geographical locations.
13. Gisborne, Ref. 9, pp. 51–52.
14. Gisborne, Ref. 9, p. 10.
15. Gisborne, Ref. 9, pp. 7–8.
16. Gisborne, Ref. 9, p. 9.
17. Gisborne, Ref. 9, pp. 10–11.
18. Gisborne, Ref. 9, p. 24.
19. As noted earlier in the brief history of geology, by the late 1830s the leading catastrophists and the uniformitarians had essentially the same theory of the earth and were only arguing over details.
20. Gisborne, Ref. 9, pp 24–29.
21. Gisborne, Ref. 9, pp. 28–43.
22. This view of how the primary and much of the transition strata were formed is very similar to that held by George Young. See Young, G., *Scriptural Geology*, p. 47, 1838.
23. Lyell used a similar argument against the progressive development theory for the history of biological life. See Lyell, C., *Principles of Geology* **I**:149, 1830–33.
24. Gisborne footnoted this (correctly) to be from Buckland's *Bridgewater Treatise*, **I**:18, 1836.
25. Gisborne, Ref. 9, p. 36.
26. He named no one in particular at this point in this discussion. Some old-earth geologists, like Higgins (1832) and Francis (1839), still believed in a global Noachian Flood. Sedgwick was quite oblique in his recantation of his belief that the Flood had caused the superficial detritus on the earth's surface, but he seems to hint that he may still have believed in a global Noachian Flood. See Sedgwick, A., Address to the Geological Society, *Philosophical Magazine*, N.S. **IX**(52):314–315, 1831. By 1836 Buckland believed in a local, tranquil Noachian Flood. See his *Bridgewater Treatise* (1836), p. 95. Greenough, in his recantation in 1834, believed that if there had been a global Flood, it left no lasting geological evidence there. See Greenough, G., Address delivered at the Anniversary Meeting of the Geological Society (Feb. 21, 1834), *Proceedings of the Geological Society* **II**(35):69–70, 1833–1834. Whether Conybeare still believed in a global Flood is not certain. He did not address the question directly when defending the catastrophist theory of geology against Lyell's uniformitarianism. See Conybeare, W., An examination of those phaenomena of geology which seem to bear most directly on theoretical speculations, *Philosophical Magazine* **IX**(52):258–270, 1831. His statement in his letter, Rev. W.D. Conybeare in reply to a layman, on geology, *Christian Observer* **34**:308, 1834, indicates that he still believed in a 'universal' Flood, but he did not define 'universal.'
27. Gisborne, Ref. 9, p. 52.
28. Gisborne, Ref. 9, pp. 52–55. For evidence of the productivity of such processes he quoted Lyell's comments in *Principles of Geology* about the transport ability of rivers and cited modern evidence of vast quantities of floating sea vegetation from the writings of Washington Irving's *History of the Life and Voyages of Christopher Columbus* (1828) and of Humboldt's *Voyage aux Régions Equinoctiales* (1814).
29. Here he cited Lyell's evidence of floating islands of vegetation sometimes encountered by contemporary seamen. Lyell, C., *Principles of Geology* **II**:97–99, 1830–33.
30. Here his description of the decline of the Flood resembles that of Conybeare, W.D. and Phillips, W., *Outlines of the Geology of England and Wales*, pp. xxi–xxviii, 1822.
31. Gisborne, Ref. 9, pp. 55–58. Though he does not dwell on it directly, it is clear from his argument about the antediluvian geological work being done by natural processes, analogous to those in the present, that Gisborne believed that such processes had produced post-Flood geological effects also. It would be inaccurate to interpret him to mean that the whole geological record, as it stood in 1837, was completed by the end of the Deluge.
32. Here he quotes Genesis 1:26–27 and 6:12–13.
33. Gisborne, Ref. 9, pp. 60–61. He ends the book here by quoting 2 Peter 2:5 and 3:5, 13.

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**Terry Mortenson** has been a missionary with Campus Crusade for Christ (CCC) for 22 years, spending most of that time working in Eastern Europe. He has a B.A. in mathematics from the University of Minnesota, an M.Div. in systematic theology from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School near Chicago, and in 1996 received a Ph.D. in the history of science (focused on the scriptural geologists) from Coventry University in England. He is married and has seven children, and presently is a teaching fellow of CCC's Institute for Biblical and Theological Studies in Budapest, Hungary.