

British Scriptural geologists in the first half of the nineteenth century: part 7. Rev. Samuel Best (1802–1873)

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Samuel Best devoted his clerical life to serving the people of Abbots Ann near Andover. His great heart was for the people and he demonstrated this through the establishment of a primary school to educate the children and a Friendly Society to help the people save in times of plenty to survive through times of famine, and to provide for their retirement. His knowledge of geology was limited to what he read and, although he disagreed with some of the theories of geologists, especially where they conflicted with Scripture, Best made science an important part of the curriculum at Abbots Ann Primary School. He wrote a 43-page booklet on geology, in which he disagreed, on Scriptural grounds, with the old-Earth views expressed by William Buckland in the latter's *Bridgewater Treatise*.

Biographical sketch¹

Samuel Best was born in 1802, the third son of William Draper Best, a Tory² lawyer who became Chief Justice of the Court of Common Pleas. William Best was knighted in 1819, and created a baron in 1829.³ Samuel attended Eton and then went on to receive his B.A. from King's College, Cambridge, in 1825, and an M.A. in 1830. An Anglican, he was ordained deacon in 1825 and priest in 1827, serving as curate of Blandford, Dorset. Also, in 1827, he married Charlotte Burrough, daughter of Sir James Burrough, another judge of the Court of Common Pleas.³ Charlotte died not long after and, in 1835, Best married Emma Duke. They had several children.

In 1831, he became the rector of Abbots Ann, Hants, a village of 500 people not far from Andover. By that time the church had had a long history of corruption as it sought

to satisfy the gentry and showed little concern for the poor.⁴ Best subsequently pastored it for over 40 years and, abandoning his establishment Tory background to become a progressive liberal, he worked for the educational, moral and economic advancement of his mostly poor, working-class parishioners. In 1831 he co-founded, with the owner of an iron foundry, the Abbots Ann Primary School for young children from all classes of society and from any denomination.⁵ Though he was respectful of dissenting (i.e. non-Anglican) Protestants, his strong convictions in favour of justification by faith alone meant that he was quite anti-Roman-Catholic, and he stressed that the Protestant faith contributed to social and political liberty.⁶ He remained headmaster of the school until 1849 and thereafter continued his support of various levels of education in the area. He became the rural Dean of Andover and was highly respected by the clergy of the area.⁷

As well as education, Best was also nationally well known for his influence in the development of Friendly Societies. These combined the benefits of an ordinary club and a savings' bank and were established to try and even out the problems of famine and plenty which plagued so many in those days, and to provide retirement income.⁷ During his first year as rector, he started the Abbots Ann Provident Society for the people of his parish.

During his clerical career, he published at least fifteen books and pamphlets, mainly on devotional, liturgical, educational and ecclesiastical themes. With regard to geology, he published a 43-page booklet entitled *After Thoughts on Reading Dr Buckland's Bridgewater Treatise*⁸ and, near the end of his ministry, *Sermons on the Beginning of All Things*.⁹

Best died on the 20th January 1873, in Abbots Ann and left £25,000 in effects.¹⁰

Geological competence and attitude to science

In 1837, Best freely acknowledged his limited knowledge of geology, beyond what he had learned through his own reading. This included William Buckland's several books on geology, and he indicated, through an oblique reference about Lyell and Hutton, that he understood their theory of uniformitarianism—the assumption of the uniformity of rates of geological processes—and so had probably read their works, as well.¹¹

Best made science an important part of the curriculum at Abbots Ann Primary School, once commenting that 'a knowledge of the principles of natural philosophy and chemistry [is] of very great importance in awakening the intellect and laying the foundation of the work of life'.¹² He considered the very scientific *Bridgewater Treatises* 'to have produced such great effects as will lead others, let us hope, to imitate the example of their noble founder'. Best declared that 'all science, rightly directed, is the handmaid of religion'. Christians, he believed, should have no fear of science but eagerly participate in its researches.

‘There is no error so dangerous as that which opposes science to revelation, there is no weakness so lamentable in the Christian as the admission that there is ground for fear. What is [the Christian’s] true position? Not one of diffidence or reluctance to advance into the fields of science, but to go in boldly with the sickle and to claim the field as his own.’¹³

Throughout his critique he expressed great respect for Buckland as a geologist, but disagreed on scriptural grounds with Buckland’s old-Earth views. He praised him for his labours and principles and said that ‘it is delightful to trace the spirit that pervades’ the *Bridgewater Treatise* and

‘... we may dwell with pleasure and astonishment on his [God’s] wisdom displayed in his creatures, nor is there any part of Dr Buckland’s treatise more delightful than that in which he leads us through his wonderful discoveries, and points out in them, as we pass, the wisdom and goodness of the Creator.’¹⁴

While accepting the facts of geology that Buckland had uncovered, Best emphasised more than once that ‘my position is, that the facts adduced by Dr Buckland do not bear it [his old-Earth theory] out, and that without incontrovertible facts there is not sufficient reason to shake the old and received opinions’ regarding the history and age of the earth as recorded in Scripture. Rather he sought to show that Buckland did not convincingly establish his theory from his facts and that Buckland’s enthusiasm for geology had ‘led him beyond sound judgement’.¹⁵ His criticism therefore was directed at the *interpretation* of the facts and inferences from the facts, *not* the facts themselves. He perceived that ‘there is great uncertainty if not inconsistency in his [Buckland’s] reasoning’.¹⁶

The relation between Scripture and science

Best believed that what we learn from the Bible is ‘the knowledge revealed to us from an unerring source’. But he did not think of the Bible as a science textbook and so ‘to the Bible it is idle to look for the revelation of scientific facts’. Nevertheless, he was convinced that, while scientific theories come and go, the truly established scientific facts would always provide strong support for the truth of Scripture.¹⁷ If the results of future scientific research would prove to confirm Buckland’s arguments, then

‘... the Christian will be ready to hail and thankfully receive them, provided they are consistent with the clear truths of Revelation; if they militate with that, which without any doubtful interpretation is clearly revealed, he will reject them with boldness, whatever sneers may meet him from the scientific world, confident that time will try and show the



The church at Abbots Ann which Rev. Samuel Best pastored for over 40 years.

futility of all such boasted discoveries.’¹⁸

So for Best, at least in 1837, Scripture was an inerrant and perspicuous revelation from God which, when correctly interpreted, stood as authoritative truth over the theories of science. The key question then was: what is the correct interpretation? On this point, as we shall see, Best was equivocal and changed over the years.

Criticisms of Buckland’s ideas

Best rejected Buckland’s ‘vague presupposition’ of long ages filled with the extinction of plant and animals species before man was created. To support his view, Best first addressed the question of human fossils. One of the reasons Buckland and others believed in these long ages was the great lack of human fossils, especially in the more ancient rock strata. But Best felt the lack of evidence resulted from looking in the wrong places. Since the cradle of civilisation was the ancient Near East, Best suggested that geologists should look there more thoroughly before drawing such general and confident conclusions.

We now know that human fossils present no serious problems, for many reasons. In fact, vertebrate fossils of any kind (reptiles, mammals, man, etc.) are exceedingly rare in the geological record compared to the fossils of invertebrates (creatures without backbones). While there is a general pattern in the ‘geological column’, with relatively simple, bottom-dwelling, sea creatures in the lowest rocks and more complex land animals and man in the uppermost deposits, the pattern is not nearly as clear and consistent as the early uniformitarians evolutionists declared. A century of discovery has progressively extended the neat stratigraphic ranges of the early fossils finds. Further, the sorting power of Noah’s Flood, the probable size of the pre-Flood human population compared to other creatures, the superior ability of man and mammals (compared to other ‘lower’ creatures) to escape the rising floodwaters, and the



The rectory at Abbots Ann, residence of Rev. Samuel Best.

likelihood that people built cities close to rivers so were swept out to sea, and other factors related to the Flood help us to understand how the Flood produced most of the fossil record with so few human remains. Indeed, there is strong historical evidence that dinosaurs and humans coexisted, contrary to evolution theory.¹⁹

Furthermore, he was not convinced that the co-existence of large reptiles and mammals with man had been disproved. He did not believe that the traditions of the ancients battling dragons, and the references to Behemoth and Leviathan in the book of Job, were simply fables, but rather were literary references to actual monstrous creatures known to man. The fossil evidence of the extinctions of animals and plants was also used as proof of long ages before man. To this Best replied that just as man was the cause of many extinctions in the present, it was reasonable to think that he was the cause of the same in the more distant past.²⁰

He rejected the notion of a tranquil Noachian Flood that left no geological evidence. He said that ‘the whole tenor of Scripture is at war’ with this idea, and cited especially Genesis 7:11. The olive branch brought back to the ark by the dove at the end of the Flood was not proof of a tranquil Flood, as supposed by others,²¹ but only that the waters had subsided. Best accepted the age of the Creation to somewhere near the dates calculated by Ussher and Hales and believed that ‘if we divided this period by the deluge, that great event, to which all history, all tradition, and even Dr Buckland in his former treatise testifies, we may readily account for the appearance of the strata’.²² He did not think we should try to interpret the strata ‘by any present operations, because it would not on consideration appear, that the same causes or the same forces are to the same extent in action’.²³

Just what geological evidence is attributable to the Flood, in Best’s view, is not clear, however, for he stated that he did not believe that the Flood formed all the sedimentary

rock strata. Furthermore, his conviction about the violence of the Deluge seemed somewhat hesitant when he said, concerning the use of Genesis 7:11, that ‘I must not adduce it as incontrovertible evidence of the force and violence of the deluge, which although it most certainly appears to intimate, it does not in terms positive prove’.²⁴ A few pages later he ascribed the non-fossiliferous strata to the beginning of Creation whereas the commencement of the fossil-bearing rocks began at Creation and then intense heat, violent inundations and volcanoes would have been ‘fully adequate in any period of time to produce the effects’ that geologists have discovered.²⁵ This phrase sounds almost indistinguishable from Buckland’s idea of long ages, except for the fact that in the pamphlet’s longest section, which followed this

statement, Best argued for the rapid formation of all the strata, contrary to Buckland, who conceded that only some of them were deposited rapidly.²⁶ Here he argued that Buckland had drawn general conclusions from inconclusive evidence. For example, Buckland cited fossil fish as evidence of the rapid deposition of some parts of the Lias formation but coprolites as evidence of gradual deposition of other parts of the Lias.²⁷ Best countered by saying that the fact that only the upper surfaces of the coprolite appeared water-eroded indicated rapid deposition. He also believed that fossilised footprints and ripple marks were evidence of rapid deposition of the strata, though in disagreeing with Buckland he seems to have misunderstood him.²⁸

In 1871, he was equally unclear on the matter. In his sermon on Genesis 7:11–12, he stated that the hills, valleys, rivers, and streams all point to the fact of the Flood. But, on the other hand, all the fossil-bearing strata

‘... have led to various theories and ingenious speculations—for to such only do they amount—explanatory of the phenomena, that have been observed. The Bible gives no account of these. It is not its object, nor are we concerned with them, except as rousing curiosity and inviting inquiry, until these theories have established themselves as facts; nor until it is certain that we read aright, and have the full meaning of the words of Revelation conveyed to us in our translation. The stratification of the earth, and the peculiar nature and composition of the soil, although important to its cultivators, does not in any way bear upon the question now under consideration [i.e. the strata], and may be referred to the different days and periods in which all things were created’.²⁹

A few sentences later, however, he again stated, ‘The Deluge is a fact ... shown on the whole face of nature’, and encouraged his congregation to go out and look at the local

countryside and valley, which show ‘that the world sunk under the prevalence of a Universal Deluge’.²⁹

In 1837, Best commended Buckland for giving up the day-age interpretation of Genesis 1 because, as Best believed, it is exegetically weak. As we would expect from his view of the Flood, Best also rejected the gap theory propounded by Buckland. In Best’s opinion, the received traditional interpretation of Genesis was simpler, and the geological evidence against this interpretation was not sufficient to abandon it. He believed that the biblical account of Creation, the Deluge and ordinary forces now at work in Creation seemed consistent with the phenomena that Buckland cited. But further grounds for rejecting a great gap of untold years before Genesis 1:3 lay in the nature of man. Best could conceive of no reason why God would create numerous worlds traversing millions of years in which numberless irrational brutes reigned and became extinct before man, for the Bible seemed to teach that the world was made for man. On Buckland’s view of time, man was reduced to the level of an animal, and a rather insignificant one at that.³⁰

But near the end of his life, in 1871, Best’s views on Genesis had changed rather markedly. His belief in the Bible was still fervent, but seemed more ambiguous. The Bible was beyond history, yet confirmable from history:

‘The Bible tells us then, of things which we could not otherwise know. It tells us of the Creation, and of the origin of all things; not as historical facts, for they are before and beyond all history, but that we may trace all things back to God. We read them as matters of faith, but all our knowledge and observation confirm them.’³¹

Without giving any concrete examples related to the Creation-evolution controversy raging at the time, he later stated,

‘It is not the object of the Bible to teach us science or history, but ten times more important truths; and yet science and history, the more they are studied and the more humbly and sincerely truth is sought, the more fully and entirely is it found to agree with what the Bible teaches.’³²

Incredibly, in 1871, Best somehow was able to accept both a gap theory and day-age theory, while at the same time believing in a geologically significant Flood! In his sermon on Genesis 1:1–2 he wrote, ‘Again “the heavens”’. What does this include? Has it any limits even in idea? And yet all this was made, and millions on millions of years have passed before the event recorded in this passage, the creation of the earth, took place.’³³ Not only were there millions of years before verse three, but Best now took the days of Genesis 1 in a non-literal fashion, based on Psalm 90:3 and 2 Peter 3:8. When preaching on Genesis 1:6–8 a few weeks later he said that ‘a long period may have elapsed in that evening which preceded the third day’. Yet, strangely, during this period the sun-earth relationship did not yet

exist: ‘The sun, as regarded the earth, had not yet assumed its office in the heavens’.³⁴ On Genesis 1:14–19 he taught that the stars were created before the fourth day and ‘the evenings of the preceding days before the sun shed his light upon the earth were probably periods of which we can form no idea or fix any extent’.³⁵ Even the word ‘light’ had an elusive meaning for Best in 1871.

‘We must not, therefore, be misled by the use of the word day in this chapter, or read it in the familiar sense in which we commonly use it. It is not our day, but a day in God’s sight. Again, light, we must not always read this in the sense which we ordinarily apply to it. It may now be the light of the sun or the borrowed light of the moon, or it may be some of those many sources of brilliant light which inquiry and science have revealed to us.’³⁶

However on the side of literal interpretation, he understood the creation of Adam and Eve as a ‘simple yet truthful account’—man was created literally from dust and as an enlightened and ennobled creature, not as an ignorant, primitive savage, as some ‘idle and foolish theories’ said.³⁷

With all this complex interpretation he nevertheless concluded his exposition of Genesis with these confident words in 1871.

‘This closes the account of the Creation. Phi-



Abbotts Ann Primary School was established in 1831 by Rev. Samuel Best. The brickwork on the left is an original part of the school.



The village of Abbotts Ann, new Andover, England.

losophy and Science have each tried to evolve in their own way the same truths, but there is a depth of shade, a vista of eternity in this simple narrative, to which Science cannot now approach, but to which, as it opens more widely the hidden wisdom of Revelation and Nature, it will hereafter yield a willing testimony. The labours, and throes, and delusions of scientific men have been mighty; the greatest intellectuals have been lost in it, and come back exhausted and confused to the simple truths which it has pleased God to reveal to us in the first chapter of His Revelation. May God give us grace to receive them.³⁸

Clearly, then, at the end of his life, though his commitment to the spiritual truth of the Scriptures seemed to remain the same, Best's position lacked the consistency of his earlier views. This was probably the result of peer pressure from within the heavily compromised church and because he lacked answers to the claims of the scientific establishment. Today, we have models and many answers that Best would have no doubt warmly embraced had they been available to him then.

Conclusion

Best was a well-educated Anglican clergyman who, when he criticized Buckland's old-Earth theory in 1837, believed that the Bible was infallible and that the history of its first few chapters was simple and perspicuous. Therefore he contended for a global catastrophic Noachian Flood and recent literal six-day Creation. He was not very detailed in his views of the harmony of geology and Genesis, for the understandable reason that he was not geologically trained. Although he was unconvinced by Buckland's rationale for his inferences from the geological and biblical data, Best was not hostile toward Buckland personally or toward geological study and science in general.

As a financially secure and comfortable rector, who worked for the poor all his life, Best was clearly not driven to write on geology out of any pecuniary motive. He did

not share the strong Tory political views of his father. His long tenure at Abbotts Ann Church and his good relations with non-conformists show that personal or denominational advancement was of little concern. Without doubt it was his strong Biblical convictions that influenced all his work and writings, including those on geological theory. But, sadly, the cultural and intellectual pressures of old-Earth, evolutionary thinking led him at the end of his life into inconsistent exegesis of Scripture at important points and into compromise of some of his earlier convictions. His life, therefore, serves as a warning to us all to keep the Word of God as the supreme authority in all our thinking.

References

1. Unless otherwise noted this is based on King, G.E. and King, P.J., *Abbotts Ann School 1831–1981*, 1981.
2. A political party which, at the time, broadly represented the interests of the country gentry, the merchant classes and official administrative groups. The term is now used in England to distinguish the Conservative Party.
3. Geddes, A., *Samuel Best and the Hampshire Labourer*, p. 3, 1981.
4. Geddes, Ref. 3, p. 4.
5. Geddes, Ref. 3, pp. 6–7.
6. Geddes, Ref. 3, pp. 4–5.
7. Obituary on Best, *Hampshire Chronicle*, p. 5, 25 January 1873.
8. Best, S., *After Thoughts on Reading Dr Buckland's Bridgewater Treatise*, J. Hatchard and Son, London, 1837. Hereafter it will be cited as *After Thoughts*.
9. Best, S., *Sermons on the Beginning of all Things as Revealed to us in the Word of God*, Simpkin, Marshall and Co., London, 1871. Hereafter it will be cited as *Sermons*.
10. The financial information was supplied by the Hampshire Record Office, by telephone on 6 November 1995.
11. Best, Ref. 8, pp. 10, 23.
12. King and King, Ref. 1, no page numbers; see also Geddes, Ref. 3, pp. 11–12.
13. Best, Ref. 8, pp. 1, 4, 3, 43.
14. Best, Ref. 8, pp. 24, 38, 39, 42.
15. Best, Ref. 8, p. 10.
16. Best, Ref. 8, p. 39.
17. Best, Ref. 8, pp. 4, 3.
18. Best, Ref. 8, p. 38.
19. Batten, D. (Ed.), Ham, K., Sarfati, J. and Wieland, C., *The Answers Book*, Master books, pp. 179–186, 1990.
20. Best, Ref. 8, pp. 10–14.
21. e.g. Lyell, C., *Principles of Geology*, 3 Volumes, London, III:272, 1830–1833 [Reprint, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1990].
22. Best, Ref. 8, p. 40.
23. Best, Ref. 8, p. 40, Here he is making an obvious reference to Lyell and Hutton, though he does not name them.
24. Best, Ref. 8, pp. 15–16.
25. Best, Ref. 8, pp. 20–21.

26. Best, Ref. 8, pp 26–37.
27. Buckland, W., *Geological and Mineralogical Considerations with Reference to Natural Theology* ('Bridgewater Treatise'), 2 Volumes, London, I:124–125, 1836.
28. Buckland, Ref. 27, I:260–266. Although Buckland treated footprints and ripple marks separately from his earlier discussion of evidences of rapid accumulation of strata (I:121–126), he stated that the footprints and ripple marks must have been quickly buried by another layer of sediment, 'before they were obliterated by any succeeding agitations of the water' (I:260) and 'while soft, and sufficiently tenacious to retain the form of the footsteps' (I:266).
29. Best, Ref. 9, pp. 120–123.
30. Best, Ref. 9, pp. 7–9.
31. Best, Ref. 9, p. 7.
32. Best, Ref. 9, p. 28.
33. Best, Ref. 9, p. 22.
34. Best, Ref. 9, p. 44.
35. Best, Ref. 9, p. 50.
36. Best, Ref. 9, p. 51.
37. Best, Ref. 9, pp. 63–64, 81–82. Best made no mention of Darwin's theory.
38. Best, Ref. 9, pp. 65–66.

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The Evil Tendencies of Old-Earth Geology[†]

'Many reverend Geologists, however, would evince their reverence for the divine Revelation by making a distinction between its historical and its moral portions; and maintaining, that the latter only is inspired and absolute Truth; but that the former is not so; and therefore is open to any latitude of philosophic and scientific interpretation, modification or denial! ... According to these impious and infidel modifiers and separators, there is not one third of the Word of God that is inspired; for not more, nor perhaps so much, of that Word, is occupied in abstract moral revelation, instruction, and precept. The other two thirds, therefore, are open to any scientific modification and interpretation; or, (if scientifically required,) to a total denial! It may however be safely asserted, that whoever professedly, before men, disbelieves the inspiration of any part of Revelation, disbelieves, in the sight of God, its inspiration altogether. If such principles were permitted of the most High to proceed to their ultimate drifts and tendencies, how long would they be sweeping all faith in revealed and inspired Veracity from off the face of the earth?...

'What the consequences of such things must be to a revelation-possessing land, time will rapidly and awfully unfold in its opening pages of national scepticism, infidelity, and apostacy [*sic*], and of God's righteous vengeance on the same!'

Henry Cole (1792–1858)
Popular Geology Subversive of Divine Revelation
(London: Hatchard and Son, 1834)
pp. ix-x, 44–45

[†] Cole, a scriptural geologist, responds to old-Earth Cambridge University geologist and Anglican minister, Adam Sedgwick. See Mortenson, T., *CEN Tech. J.* 13(1) 92–99, 1999.