

## British scriptural geologists: part 10. Fowler De Johnstone

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Nothing is known of Fowler De Johnstone apart from the words of his book addressed to William Buckland in 1838. The author, who identifies himself as a Reverend, is very zealous to defend the Word of God. However, his style is overly pompous and his arguments are vacuous. His writing is not typical of the scriptural geologists (none of whom are referred to) and does not deal with the then current issues in the Genesis–geology debate. The result is reminiscent of well-meaning Christians who fear science and sound the battle cry against it, rather than being willing to engage their God-given minds to see the revelation of His eternal power and divine nature in His creation and to carefully defend the clear teaching of His Word.

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What we can know of Johnstone is limited to personal references found in his 249-page book, *Vindication of the Book of Genesis addressed to Rev. William Buckland*, published in 1838.<sup>1</sup> On the title page he identified himself as ‘Reverend’ and ‘a writer on divinity’ and signed it in London. But if he wrote anything else, nothing seems to have survived.<sup>2</sup> Throughout the book, he used a very pompous style<sup>3</sup> with plenty of metaphorical and symbolic language and conveyed an attitude that he was *THE* Defender of the Bible. For example:

‘In expressing truth opposed to thought indulged by learned men, I would that humility’s Robe may shield me from nature’s impassioned wave: and may the Source from whom man true wisdom learns, boldness with discretion mingle, that I may bear and forbear with steadfastness in humble Christian spirit, since, being invited to defend the Word, grateful I obey the voice of Mercy, Love, and Power, He whispers to the soul.

Had those who objected to the Bible Root, projected a scheme to vary any inferior writing it might have passed unheeded by: But when a cloud hovering presents to veil the precious truths my God to me has given! and not to me only but to mankind! The Bible’s Spirit calling a Defender, a duty it became to

move obedient to the voice that leads me to the field where, in th’ Almighty’s strength, may I stronger and stronger grow, while a bearer of the guardian shield I stand, to preserve his picture in the native glory! . . . . I am not a party man: neither am I alone, for looking deeper and higher I see that He! in whom I trust is with me; and as it pleaseth Him to feed the soul with light, the heart must incline, the will is brought to yield, the reasoning faculty consenting, commands the organs active, causing the tongue and pen to express the truths that, till now have stood and, must eternal stand.’<sup>4</sup>

### His argument

The warfare motif dominates his book on Genesis. The title page reads, ‘Truth, in defence of the Word of God—vanquishing infidelity’ and the book was addressed to William Buckland

‘wherein his [Buckland’s] objections to the first chapter of Genesis are met—the stumbling stone removed—and the texts in the three first chapters fully explained, in the Spirit of the Word from the beginning of the book of Genesis to the end of the Revelation of St. John the divine.’

However, the book does not even scratch the surface of this stated objective. Johnstone spoke of his own humility but clearly considered himself to be a unique defender, bearing ‘the shield and sword’ in the prayer that his writing would by God’s providence repel ‘the serpent host of passions which so shadow the souls of men who fain would blot the Sacred Word!’ Concerning geology, he dismissed the charge of his supposed opponents that he insufficiently addressed geological matters, for he said he was engaged in defending the Bible.<sup>5</sup>

The book is divided into seven parts, each in the form of a question and answer conversation between the two combatants, ‘Infidelity’ and ‘Truth’. ‘Infidelity’ represents the man who ‘objecting to the first chapter of Genesis, rejects the Word of God, and meditates a varying of the same to suit the views of geologists’. ‘Truth’ on the other hand ‘takes up the rejected Word; meets the objections, and defends the Bible’s glory’.<sup>6</sup> Contrary to what one might expect from the title page, most of the questions of ‘Infidelity’ do not reflect the views of Buckland or engage in the Genesis–geology debate.

Only Parts II and VI have any questions directly related to Buckland’s view. In Part II there are only two, with the questions and their answers covering a mere three pages. The first is worth quoting to show the style of writing and argument which runs throughout the book.

‘INFIDELITY. What effect has been produced by the declaration of the Reverend William Buckland, professor of geology, of Christ Church, Oxford: “That a change has been judged necessary in the interpretation of the first chapter of Genesis, that treats of the creation of the world, and its organic creatures?”

TRUTH. Such declaration could not fail to inter-

rupt Christian calm, weaken men's faith in the Word of God, and chill their confidence in the religion of life: When it was openly avowed by the Rev. Professor, it being calculated to unsettle the faith of many well-disposed minds in the Holy Bible; the blessed Book calling for a defender, a voice was heard in defence of the sacred volume, that its glory may remain unveiled, and the casket of life receive the honour from mortals due to its immortal spirit; God's work advanced to check any clouding torrent Satan might cause to flow, and this was deemed in season, because the lukewarm suffered the poisoning peace-destroying streams, to creep unnoticed by; some fondling inferior passions, approved the irreligious scheme, when Truth entered the field of controversy, to give the interpretation of Jehovah's Word, not according to the theories of human creators, but, aided from above, to interpret the Word, applying the same to the condition of man, as approved by God whose Spirit Word it is.<sup>77</sup>

The second question with respect to Buckland related to his supposition that Luther was uncertain of the meaning of the creation account,<sup>8</sup> because allegedly Luther transposed the order of the first three verses of Genesis in his commentary. As we have seen earlier in studying Luther's commentary on Genesis,<sup>9</sup> Buckland and others revealed a palpably superficial understanding of Luther's views. In his answer, Johnsone correctly said that Buckland had erred in his interpretation of Luther, but Johnsone did not support this conclusion with any summary of or quotes from Luther's writings on Genesis.<sup>10</sup>

Johnsone also gave five reasons for rejecting Buckland's attempted harmonization of geological theory with the Bible. Those five reasons, in the form of brief rhetorical questions to all of which Johnsone clearly expected a negative answer, were 1) If geology is so harmonious with Scripture, why is there a need for a reinterpretation of Genesis?, 2) Can geological data be rightly interpreted apart from the Bible? 3) Doesn't such reinterpretation of Genesis disturb the Christian's faith? 4) On what authority does Buckland say that God created the world before Genesis says He did? 5) Do geologists find better evidence for the existence and nature of God through geology than through other pursuits?<sup>11</sup>

Throughout the book, Johnsone's answers are generally full of figurative interpretations of Genesis, quite unlike the commentaries and the writings of the Scriptural geologists of the time. He did not engage in the real debate over the extent and nature of the Flood, the age of the earth and the interpretation of the strata and fossils. Only in one question, covering a page and a half, in Part VI, did he treat the Deluge, stating that it changed the surface of the pre-Flood world and produced the stratified fossil-bearing rocks.<sup>12</sup> Nowhere did he refer to any Scriptural geologist, or to any other opponents than Buckland, Pusey and Chalmers.

## Conclusion

Johnsone apparently believed the Flood produced the sedimentary rock, but that is about all we know of his view of the matter. He appears to have known nothing of geology. Whether or not he opposed the study of science or geology is difficult to say. But he saw himself as supreme defender of Scriptural truth against the attacks of leading scientists. I had to wonder who in the nineteenth century would seriously read 249 pages of such writing as Johnsone produced, or who would sit under such preaching. Neither the poorly-educated nor the aristocrats nor fellow clergymen seem to be likely candidates. Given the strange name of the author, the difficulty of conceiving of a motive for his near anonymity, and the unusual style combined with an almost vacuous argument (contrary to all scriptural geologists I read), I entertained the possibility that the book was someone's idea of a joke, designed to tar all scriptural geologists by the association of Johnsone's work with theirs. But there seems to be enough sincere religious belief conveyed in the book to suppose that some Christian divine actually thought and wrote this way. In any case, no honest critic of the scriptural geologists could say that this was typical of their arguments.

## References

1. Hereafter it is cited simply as *Vindication*. Johnsone was not listed in either Richard Gilbert, *The Clerical Guide* (1836), or *The Clergy List* for 1841.
2. Nothing else appears under his name in either the British Library Catalogue or the National Union Catalogue.
3. This style was utterly different from anything else I read from this time period by either scriptural geologists or others.
4. Johnsone, Fowler de, *Vindication* (1838), p. vii. Dots in the original.
5. de Johnsone, ref. 4. p. viii–ix.
6. de Johnsone, ref. 4. p. 7.
7. de Johnsone, ref. 4. p. 42–43.
8. Professor Pusey and Dr Chalmers were said to share this supposition. Actually, it was Pusey, writing in the footnotes of Buckland's 1836 *Bridgewater Treatise* (I:25), rather than Buckland himself, who referred to Luther's view.
9. Mortenson, T., British scriptural geologists in the first half of the nineteenth century: Part 1. Historical setting, *TJ* 11(2):221–252, 1997; <[www.answersingenesis.org/home/area/magazines/tj/docs/tjv11n2\\_scrip\\_geol.asp](http://www.answersingenesis.org/home/area/magazines/tj/docs/tjv11n2_scrip_geol.asp)>.
10. This would have had to be in German, since Luther's commentary on Genesis was not translated until 1858 by Henry Cole.
11. de Johnsone, ref. 4. p. 43–45.
12. de Johnsone, ref. 4. p. 191–192.

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