

CHAPTER 11

CHRISTIAN RESPONSES OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

The 20th century did not begin with widespread and intense controversy on the subjects of the age of the earth and the Biblical Flood, as did the 19th. In the present century there have been numerous varieties of response to the observations of geology, just as there were earlier. However, the issue of the age of the earth has not reached the proportions among the clergy that it did in the days of Buckland and Lyell. Because both conservative and liberal theologians had finally come to accept the basic evidences for age, the early part of the 20th century did not see many serious debates on the subject. Due to the publications of Darwin's Origin of Species, in 1859, evolutionary theory now held more of the attention of the conservatives than did the matter of age.¹

Following the dissemination of Darwin's writings many conservative theologians adopted a theistic evolution position, whereas others rejected evolutionary theory but at the same time acknowledged the validity of geologic evidences for an older earth. Liberal theologians usually rejected the historicity of the Genesis account of creation, and substituted naturalistic explanations of both the earth and life upon it. The Biblical account was regarded as mythical, and in a similar category to that of the creation myths of Babylonia and Egypt. Another (less prominent) group was that of traditionalists who continued to reject practically all scientific research as incompatible with the Bible, and to hold to the idea of an earth only a few thousand years old.

The main stream of conservative, evangelical Christianity during the early 20th century recognized the validity of a large part of geological and paleontological research, but continued to hold strongly to the doctrine of the divine inspiration of the Scriptures. Consequently, as the century progressed, evangelical Bible scholars continued to make various attempts to reconcile the Biblical account of creation with the data of science. It will be remembered that during the latter 18th and in the 19th centuries there were numerous attempts at such reconciliation, though several of these efforts eventually came to be recognized as premature and unsupportable.

One of the early 19th century attempts at reconciliation which had continued to be used was the gap theory of Thomas Chalmers and others, which was mentioned in the previous chapter. This view received new momentum during the latter part of the 19th century as a result of wide circulation of the book Earth's Earliest Ages, by G. H. Pember.² Pember's primary interest, as expressed in this book, was in the activities of Satan and the demonic forces which he believed were responsible for the catastrophic ruin of the pre-adamic earth. Nevertheless, the book exercised a considerable influence among evangelical Christians in promoting belief in a very old original earth. This publication by Pember seems to have been a primary factor in popularizing the gap theory among the creationists³ of the