

D. Russell Humphreys' Cosmology and the 'Timothy Test': A Reply

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Young-Earth creationists contend that a straightforward meaning of the Scripture supports a creation over six normal days about 6,000–10,000 years ago.¹ They further contend that 'if the plain sense makes sense, we should seek no other sense, lest it be nonsense'. Since Scripture is the Word of God, its teachings are correct, even if they disagree with the opinions of fallible scientists, who are sinful like all humans (except the God-Man Jesus Christ, of course).

As Russell Humphreys puts it, in what he calls the 'Timothy test':—

*'To make these points [of a plain meaning of Scripture] a little clearer, imagine a Jewish Christian of the first century who understands Greek, Hebrew and the Scriptures well. Let's call him "Timothy" since Paul's protege was like that. But let's also imagine that this Timothy knows nothing of the advanced scientific knowledge of his day, such as Aristotle's works. All that Timothy knows is from either everyday experience or careful study of Scripture, which Paul says is sufficient for wisdom (2 Tim. 3:15). Now if Scripture really is straightforward and sufficient, then the meaning Timothy derives from the words is probably the meaning that God intended for everybody to get.'*²

SUFFICIENCY OF SCRIPTURE

The 'Timothy test' is a simplified restatement of the Reformation (and Biblical) doctrine of *Sola Scriptura*. The thrust of Phillips' article and Hugh Ross' teachings in general is a denial of this vital doctrine. This doctrine says that Scripture is inerrant, authoritative and sufficient as a guide in all matters of doctrine and morality for Christians. Thus for salvation, no-one is obliged to believe anything which is neither taught explicitly by Scripture nor logically deducible from Scripture.

But it is fallacious to limit Scriptural authority to these matters. Doctrine is inextricably linked to history and science, so that whatever Scripture affirms on scientific or historical matters is also true (cf. John 3:12). For example, the key doctrine of the Resurrection is linked to the historical fact that Jesus' body had vacated the tomb on the third day. It also impinges on science, because naturalistic scientists

assert that it is impossible for dead men to rise. And the meaning of Jesus' death and resurrection is tied to the historical accuracy of the event (the Fall) recorded in Genesis (I Corinthians 15:21–22).

Sola Scriptura is based on what Paul wrote in II Timothy 3:15–17

¹⁵ 'and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.

¹⁶ All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness,

¹⁷ so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.' (NIV)

It should be noted that:

- (1) the Greek word for 'Scriptures' in verse 15 is γραμματα (*grammata*), and must refer to the Old Testament alone, as these are the only Scriptures Timothy would have known from his childhood.
- (2) in verse 16, the word is γραφη (*graphey*), which would include the Old Testament plus all the New Testament written by then (AD 63), that is, all the New Testament except II Peter, Hebrews, Jude, and John's writings. As Paul's writings were divinely inspired, this statement would apply even to the latter books.
- (3) 'God-breathed' is indeed a correct translation by the NIV of the Greek word θεοπνευστό (*theopneustos*). If Scripture is 'God-breathed' and God cannot err, it logically follows that Scripture cannot err.
- (4) Scripture is able to make a man 'wise unto salvation' and 'thoroughly furnished unto all good works'. This implies that Scripture contains all the doctrine and moral law we need.
- (5) I Timothy 5:18 cites both Deuteronomy 25:4 and Luke 10:7 as *graphey*; that is, both the Old and New Testaments. This again shows that the New Testament was already regarded as Scripture even in apostolic times. Also, Peter affirms that Paul's writings were also Scripture in II Peter 3:15–16.

We can also see from Christ and His apostles how important Scripture was. Acts 17:10–11 says:

'And the brethren immediately sent away Paul and Silas by night unto Berea: who coming thither went into the

synagogue of the Jews. These were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the Scriptures daily, whether those things were so.'

This shows that even Paul's teaching was subjected to the test of Scripture by people who were commended for it. So Christians today should follow that Berean example and test the teachings of any church or scientist by Scripture. Christ's maternal half-brother Jude wrote (Jude 3):

'... and exhort you that ye should earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints'. If the faith was once delivered, then there is no need for additional revelations of doctrine after the canon of Scripture was closed.

The true meaning of Scripture is the meaning God intended, and God also intended ordinary people (with the help of the Holy Spirit — I Corinthians 2:14) to understand His meaning — that's why God inspired it.

APPLICATION OF THE 'TIMOTHY TEST' TO THE DAYS OF CREATION

Phillips takes Humphreys to task for applying it to Exodus 20:11

'For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.' (NIV)

Humphreys claims that Timothy, without the benefit of modern evolutionary scientists to tell him that the Universe was billions of years old, would have concluded that this teaches that the world was made in six ordinary days. The Scriptural evidence shows that Humphreys is right. In the Exodus passage cited, the days of creation are linked with the ordinary days of the working week.

The Hebrew word *yom* (day) occurs 2291 times in the Old Testament, and nearly always means a literal day. This doesn't mean that there are no other contexts where *yom* means something different, but they do not affect the meaning of Genesis 1. The plural *yamim* occurs 845 times and always means literal days. When modified by a numeral or ordinal in historical narrative (359 times in the Old Testament outside Genesis 1), it always means a literal day of about 24 hours. When modified by 'evening and/or morning' (38 times outside Genesis 1), it always means a literal day. Exodus 20:11 only makes sense with literal days. There were plenty of words that God could have used if He had wanted to teach long periods of time, yet He did not use them.^{3,4}

Just about all Church Fathers, Orthodox Jews and Reformers understood Genesis 1 this way. James Barr, then Regius Professor of Hebrew at Oxford University, made it clear that all professors of Hebrew at world-class universities agree that the author of Genesis intended to teach a recent creation in six ordinary days and a global Flood.⁵ Barr, a liberal, did not **believe** it, but he understood what the Hebrew

so clearly **taught**. It was only the perceived need to harmonise with the alleged age of the Earth which led people to think anything different — it was nothing to do with the text itself.

Phillips disagrees:

'Humphreys **presumes** Timothy would infer that Exodus 20:11 teaches that creation occurred in six literal days, but how do we know this?'

We know this on the basis of the Scriptural evidence. The burden of proof is on someone denying the linguistic and contextual evidence as above. But Phillips argues:

'Perhaps Timothy would have concluded that **when taken in totality**, Scripture strongly favours creative periods longer than six 24-hours days.'

Phillips references an article of his which asserts 'that the terminology and the activities as recorded in Genesis chapter two strongly favour a duration of time for the sixth day that is much longer than 24 hours.'⁶

But this ignores the overwhelming Scriptural evidence for 24-hour days, and is based on flawed human perceptions about what is or is not possible to do. Young-Earth creationists have responded to this errant perception.^{7,8} Since Phillips and Ross accept, without question, the current popular view that the Universe is 10–20 billion years old, the 'days' of creation must average more than a billion years each. Furthermore, their 'days' overlap considerably in an attempt to harmonise the creation account with the standard evolutionary/uniformitarian geological time-frame.⁹ This effectively denies even the Genesis sequence of events of Creation.

CAN THE 'TIMOTHY TEST' MISLEAD?

Phillips' whole thrust is to answer 'yes' to this. However, he is repeating the errors of the Roman Catholic Church. This church teaches that ordinary people cannot understand Scripture without the guidance of the 'infallible' Church of Rome led by the Pope. Phillips says that ordinary people cannot understand Scripture without the insight of modern interpretations of chronology from biased and fallible scientists. Both these errors put another mediator between God and Man (cf. I Timothy 2:5), and contrast with the Bereans in Acts 17:11 (see above).

An important aspect of *Sola Scriptura* is the principle that **Scripture interprets Scripture**. Because Scripture is inerrant and sufficient, if we come to a difficult passage, we should be able to interpret it by referring to a clearer passage. If we still cannot understand it, we should admit that the fault may be in our thinking and not in the Scriptures!

An example is the use of figures of speech in the Bible. Phillips acknowledges that Humphreys had allowed for this. But this is not a denial of *Sola Scriptura*, which does require a knowledge of the Biblical languages as Humphreys' 'Timothy' does (see above).

Phillips rejects the 'Timothy test' by appealing to some alleged difficulties in the plain understanding of Scripture.

I will briefly respond to his examples.

Joshua's Long Day

Phillips asserts that the '**straightforward, face-value interpretation**' of this passage implies that the Sun moves around the Earth. But there is nothing wrong with this — **all** motion must be described with respect to a reference frame. For earthbound people, the Earth is a convenient reference frame, even though it is not inertial (orbital and rotational motion means that it is an accelerating reference frame). Even now, engineering and nautical astronomers, for most applications, use Earth as a reference frame, at the centre of a great celestial sphere. The Biblical writers were merely using convenient phenomenological language (language of appearances), just like modern people who refer to 'sunset' and 'sunrise'.

But from the point of view of the solar system as a whole, I favour the explanation that God caused the relative motion of the Sun across the sky to cease by stopping the Earth's rotation (the Earth may not have stopped too suddenly, as verse 13 states that the Sun 'did not hasten to go down for about a day').

Therefore there is nothing in the plain meaning of the Joshua account which logically implies geocentrism. Also, there are no other doctrines depending on the relative motions of the Earth and Sun. This contrasts to the central importance of the six day creation to the Sabbath command (Exodus 20:8–11) and the teaching that Adam's sin is the ultimate cause of death and suffering in the world (Romans 5:12, I Corinthians 15:21–22, compare I Corinthians 15:26 with Genesis 1:31). The latter teaching is explicitly denied by all schemes such as those of Phillips and Ross who put hundreds of millions of years of death, suffering and disease before Adam and Eve sinned and brought about the curse on the whole creation (Genesis 3:17–19, Romans 8:19–22).

It is typical of progressive creationists and theistic evolutionists to compare themselves with Galileo, supposedly a gallant fighter against a benighted church and Biblical literalism. But Galileo's ideas had challenged the **Aristotelian/Ptolemaic ideas of the academic establishment**. It was the **Aristotelians at the universities** who persuaded the Church that their theories were taught by Scripture and that Galileo was contradicting Scripture.^{10,11} Today it is progressive creationists and theistic evolutionists who are telling Christendom that billions of years are taught by Scripture. In fact, young-Earth supporters are accused of 'dividing the church' and having 'distorted the Gospel and hampered evangelism'¹² for challenging the majority scientific view of the day. So, despite Phillips' assertion, the Galileo affair should actually warn the Church not to tie Scripture to any man-made theory, whether Aristotelianism or billions of years.¹³

Did the Judges Rule Sequentially?

Phillips asserts:

'It is fair to say that a "Timothy test" reading of the

book of Judges gives the distinct impression that the judges ruled sequentially. Nothing in the text suggests otherwise. Nevertheless, it is clear that sequential judgements are impossible.'

He backs this up by pointing out that other parts of Scripture leave only '*299 years for the judges to rule, which is far less than the 410 years required for sequential rule.*' But here again Phillips misses the point of the 'Timothy test'. 'Timothy' has a good knowledge of Scripture, and would compare Scripture with Scripture. So he would realise that the numbers don't add up if they are sequential reigns. But since there is nothing in the text to rule it out, he would probably conclude that some of the judges ruled concurrently. This is supported by the fact that the various oppressors came from different directions, so would have affected some tribes more than others. The judges could have ruled mainly over the oppressed tribes, before the Israelite nation was unified under the Monarchy.

The Chronology of the Kings

Phillips again uses the 'Timothy test' as a scapegoat for the problems people have seen in the historical Old Testament books of Kings and Chronicles. But again he misses the point that 'Timothy' has a good knowledge of Scripture. Such a person would recognise that there must be quite a complex way of reckoning reign lengths of kings so the numbers can be reconciled. Also, 'Timothy' has a good knowledge of Hebrew. There is nothing in the test criterion which says he cannot use archaeological insights to augment his knowledge of the way language was used in Biblical times.

The Genealogies of Genesis 5 and 11

Phillips tries to show that the 'Timothy test' (straightforward meaning) would not uncover gaps in the genealogies. However, three of his reasons are based on comparison with other Scriptures which list genealogies with gaps, for example, Matthew's genealogy of Jesus. This is within the 'Timothy test' criteria, as pointed out above.

However, his other reasons are based on his own unproven assumptions, and a denial of the historicity of the genealogies. Phillips' claim that the genealogies '*provide "specimen lives" of antediluvian life*' appears to deny the longevity of the Patriarchs. There is not the slightest evidence in the text that the lifespans were recorded as non-historical. Indeed, the exponential decrease after Noah is consistent with a catastrophic environmental change and population bottleneck after the Flood.¹⁴ But such lifespans cannot easily be harmonised with old-Earth/theistic evolution ideas.

Israel's Border Cities Listed in Joshua 14–19

Phillips believes that this is anachronistic, because archaeology has not uncovered most of them. So he claims that the book had been edited during the Monarchy, with the cities mentioned to give contemporary readers an idea

where the events took place. He claims that this could not have been deduced by the 'Timothy test'. This is dubious, from the example he gave:

'Suppose someone were to ask today: "Where did Washington cross the Delaware River?, the answer most likely would be 'Just south of New Hope, Pennsylvania.'" This answer is correct, and no-one would be troubled by the fact that New Hope did not exist in Washington's time.'

This shows that a straightforward 'Timothy test' reading can allow for cities as location markers for events which preceded them. So this example doesn't support Phillips' case.

It should also be pointed out that his archaeological argument is one of silence. This is always dubious — absence of evidence is not evidence of absence! The Hittites were once thought to be a Biblical myth due to lack of evidence, but their enormous ancient capital Hattusa was discovered at modern Boghazköy, Turkey. Archaeology has also vindicated the war of four kings versus five in Genesis 14 and Belshazzar's kingship in Daniel. All these were once thought to be Biblical errors because of a lack of archaeological evidence.

The archaeological dating of the cities is also in question, since they are based on a link with dubious secular theories of Egyptian chronology. This is also the source for the anti-Biblical date of 1260 BC for the Exodus that Phillips cites with approval. However, many authors propose that centuries can be shaved off the Egyptian timescale, and this would bring the dates into line with Biblical history.^{15,16} So the reason the archaeologists have not found those cities could be that they were looking in the wrong time zone.

Phillips also asserts that the statement about Dan's exile in Judges 18:30:

'Clearly [refers] to the one under the Assyrian invasion that led to the destruction of Israel in 722 BC. The addition was made to the Judges passage to clarify the situation for later readers.'

'Timothy' would not necessarily have a problem with editorial additions. The record of Moses' death in Deuteronomy 34 was probably added by Joshua. However, it is not as 'clear' as Phillips asserts. The exile could have been the exile of the Ark when it was captured from Shiloh by the Philistines in the 11th century BC (I Samuel 4:11).¹⁷ This makes more sense, because Jewish tradition ascribes to Samuel the books of Judges, Ruth and Samuel.¹⁸

CONCLUSION

Phillips' attempt to deny *Sola Scriptura* by raising several supposed difficulties has not succeeded. The examples he raised can all be solved by comparison with other Scriptures or a deeper understanding of the way the original languages of Scripture were used. Thus he provides no evidence that a proper understanding of Scripture is

impossible apart from fashionable theories by fallible scientists, many of whom are non-Christians. Thus there is no basis for understanding Genesis 1 and Exodus 20:11 as teaching anything other than creation in six consecutive normal days. This of course means that the Universe is 'young', compared to the billions of years scenarios advocated by Phillips and Ross.

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