Lords of creation: American scriptural geology and the Lord brothers' assault on "intellectual atheism"

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Abstract (Summary)
This dissertation examines the phenomenon of "scriptural geology"--the nineteenth century equivalent of young-earth creationism largely ignored by historians. More specifically, I look at two brothers prior to the Civil War who publicly defended a literal interpretation of Genesis 1--this at a time when naturalists and theologians were strongly campaigning for alternative readings in keeping with the scientific discovery of deep time. David and Eleazar Lord, however, favored an independent method of exegesis that relied on the analytical tools of philology to determine the intended meaning of any biblical passage. In the case of Genesis, they merely observed its literary style and grammatical construction rather than exegete it according to modern theories of natural science wholly unknown to the original Hebrew audience. In short, the Lords opposed any interpretation based primarily on extra-biblical considerations, such as fossil and other geological evidence.

Given the prevailing evangelical ethos of this period, the primary theological animus for the Genesis reconcilers and the Lord brothers who opposed them was the doctrine of plenary inspiration and its corollary, biblical inerrancy. All orthodox parties who debated the time frame of Genesis 1 were nonetheless unified in their opposition to German rational, or "higher criticism," of the Bible. But whereas for some, preserving scriptural inerrancy led to the development of new interpretive strategies designed to harmonize the Genesis chronology with geological ages, the Lords took the opposite approach; they held out for the historical accuracy of the creation narrative by rejecting what they considered to be faulty philosophical and methodological assumptions informing science, all of which led to an unnecessary conflict between historical geology and the Biblical history of creation. It was this earth science, they argued, that needed to be reformulated--not the traditional view of Genesis.

Because today's historians concentrate chiefly on those who reconciled Genesis to science during this period, such as the seminarians of Princeton, the opposing arguments of the other side have received scant coverage--this, in spite of the fact that their views represented a sizable segment of the nineteenth-century Church who continued to believe that the earth was only five days older than man. By focusing on the scriptural geology of the Lord brothers and giving their arguments serious as opposed to superficial scrutiny, this dissertation constitutes one modest attempt to mitigate a historiographic deficiency.