CAVERNS OF PRAISE

"Let the heaven and earth praise him, the seas, and every thing that moveth therein." Psalm 69:34

I enjoy exploring local caves, trying to squeeze in farther than I have before, only to once again realize it is simply too small. Yet I continue to try. There is something fascinating about caves. For those willing to endure dark, wet, tight spaces, caves offer adventurous opportunities for exploration. But it seems most cave tours usually reiterate the common idea that caves and cave formations are the result of slow, gradual processes over tens of thousands of years. So, how do caves reconcile with the Bible's approximately 6,000 years of earth history? Let's see whether they are caverns of doubt or echo-chambers of God's praise.

Caves in the Bible

First, the Bible mentions caves quite a lot. Lot and his daughters lived in a cave after the destruction of Sodom. Abraham bought a cave from Ephron the Hittite at Machpelah in which to bury his wife Sarah. Five kings hid in a cave after being defeated by Joshua and the Israelites. David hid from King Saul in the cave of Adullam.

Then there is the cave where Obadiah hid one hundred prophets from Queen Jezebel, who wanted to kill them. And the cave on Mt. Sinai where Elijah the prophet stayed and heard God speak in a still, small voice. Even the tomb in which Lazarus was buried, whom Jesus raised from the dead, is described as a cave. There are many caves in the Bible. From shelter, a place to hide, or even as tombs, caves were useful throughout history.

Cave Terms

Some names and terms used about caves may be unfamiliar to people. Speleothems refer to rock formations inside caves. There are many different types of speleothems, but probably some of the most well-known are the dripping speleothems: stalactites, stalagmites, and columns. Stalactites are formations that hang down from the ceiling, while stalagmites are similar formations that extend up from the floor. A column is formed when a stalactite and stalagmite join each other. An interesting variant of a

stalactite is known as soda straws. These are very long, thin stalactites that, as the name suggests, resemble soda straws.

There are also speleothems formed by gravitational flow across cave surfaces, like flowstones and draperies. Draperies form as thin sheets hanging from the ceilings and walls of caves. Sometimes draperies can be thin enough that light shines through them, showing different colored bands. These types of draperies are called "cave bacon." There are other types as well, like cave popcorn, cave pearls, shields, rafts, etc. (Note that neither cave popcorn nor cave bacon are edible!)

Don't Caves Form Very Slowly?

Many people assume that caves and cave formations form very slowly over thousands, or even hundreds of thousands of years. As the calcite making up many of these speleothems is leached from the surrounding limestone, other minerals come with it, some of which contain radioactive elements that can be used for radioisotope dating. Now, radioisotope dating relies on several very large assumptions about the origin and history of the rocks, assumptions of conditions that are simply unknown. We don't know the exact conditions of the rocks from their formation to their present condition, so the assumptions of radioisotope dating are unreliable.

Still, radioisotope dating is used on speleothems, sometimes yielding dates of over a hundred thousand years. That is a long time for a cave formation to grow! Just think: not one change in where the water drips for tens of thousands of years. No major changes in growth rate. These are some big assumptions that I think are better to avoid.

Evidence of Rapid Speleothem Formation

So, let's examine some of the problems with the assumption that cave formations take long periods of time to form. First, it is known that different speleothems form at different rates, sometimes varying from place to place in the same cave. It all depends on the rate of water seeping through the conduits feeding the formations, and the amount of mineral content leached out of the surrounding rock. As the water flows through a small seam in the rock, it removes minerals from the sides of the seam, enlarging it over time. We would expect, then, that the rate of speleothem growth should vary over time anyway. As we see, cave formations are much more complex than many have been led to believe.

Another interesting clue are recent objects that have been covered quickly by cave formations, such as old mining equipment, dishes, even bats that have been covered quickly enough to preserve more than just bones.1 With the right conditions, speleothem formation can happen fast, and we would expect that the conditions in Noah’s flood that quickly formed the rock layers could also have helped to speed up the initial formation of caves in those rock layers.

There are also instances of "speleothems" that have formed from man-made objects like basements or drainpipes. I once noticed a highway overpass in the mountains of Transylvania in Romania that appeared to have "soda straws" hanging underneath.2 I

don't know when the bridge was constructed, but it is safe to assume it was not tens of thousands of years ago!

There is much more about caves that could be addressed, but I hope that what we have covered here serves to communicate this truth: the actual scientific evidence from the caves themselves turns out to be in perfect harmony with the Bible's account of history.

The Cave That Changed the World

Of all the caves in the world, and of all the caves mentioned in the Bible, there is one that changed the world more than any other. This cave, unlike many caves visited today for the beautiful speleothems inside them, is significant because of what is not in it. Two thousand years ago, our Creator came to this world to become one of us. Jesus died on the cross to redeem us and save us from our sin, after which he was laid in a hand-hewn tomb, or man-made "cave." Three days later, He rose from the dead, defeating death, and offers us forgiveness and new life if we will repent of our sins and believe in Him. The tomb is still empty. What have you done with His offer?

~Denton Ford

1. Emil Silvestru, "The Cave Book" (Green Forest, AR: Master Books, 2008) p.68
2. This is the bridge where E79 crosses over Strada Timișoara in the town of Petroșani in Hunedoara county.