



Life without a Preacher: Darwin's *Origin of Species*

STEVE PAULSON

Never having experienced life without God, I can nevertheless have sympathy for those that do. However, as Luther taught in the *Large Catechism's* first commandment, it would be more accurate to say that there is no such thing as life without gods. To have a god is whatever you place your trust in and to whomever you go in times of trouble. The heart makes gods even where there are none. Theologically this means a person may not live without God, but may very well live without a preacher. You will have God one way or another, preached or not preached. The distinction is not a subjective choice, but depends upon the Holy Spirit to send a preacher, “for how will they hear without a preacher, and how will one preach unless sent?” (Rom 10:14–15).

So, how does one begin the story of human life if there is no God at the beginning who says anything? What replaces the preacher's (or priestly) account, “In the beginning God made the heavens and the earth...”? Charles Darwin's bracing *The Origin of Species* begins this way: “When we compare the individuals of the same variety or sub-variety of our older cultivated plants and animals, one of the first points which strikes us is, that they generally differ more from each other than do the individuals of any one species or variety in a state of nature.” This preamble is not as striking as the one that begins with the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob

In the modern “life without God” one of the principal “theologians” of non-theism is the scientist Charles Darwin, whose work essentially predicates an alternative to the traditional Christian worldview. Steve Paulson compares this stance with the Christian proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

giving a promise, but it is no less monumental. When God is silent the first thing we notice is the overwhelming diversity of life. Then we are compelled to seek the origin of this diversity in terms of a single, universal law, or as we say today, we seek a way to “celebrate” diversity. Diversity must begin in oneness, and somehow return to it.

GENRE OF GENESIS ONE

This approach to life without a preacher has made the first chapter of Genesis a battleground that demands a judgment about genre—is it science or myth? Unfortunately, these two choices are severely limited, since they are both ruled tyrannically by the law alone. If the genre is scientific record, then we are dealing with development of life according to consistent laws of “nature.” Creation would then mean working out the inviolable laws of origin—the first cause of the booming, buzzing multiplicity. If, however, the genre of first Genesis is myth, then its words are a kind of poetry that conveys ideas of the sort that shape young minds into preferred patterns of behavior. Myths are morals, less in the sense of ten commandments that reveal the minimum expectation of life (or God), and more like virtue that sets before children the goals to aspire to in order to reach full potential as a virtuous person. So teachers tell stories to students that prove themselves over time as ordered by our highest aspirations. Myths fit our teleological purposes (final cause) by providing a choice between good and evil. They concern aspirational law rather than merely descriptive natural law.

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So, despite their differences, what science and myth share is reading Genesis by the law alone. Consequently, both genres have difficulty with history, since history’s accidents defy prognostication and often resist law and order. Virtues are often not met; laws of nature come to odious conclusions that we would rather deny, especially how certain is death. Yet myth has clearly become the preferred option for modern readings of Genesis concerning final cause, just as science had been the preferred medieval choice that described the origin of things as the unmoved mover. So, when “in the beginning God created” is understood as myth, the story says God is something good—indeed the highest good. Therefore, God cannot be the cause of everything in life since God cannot cause evil. Moreover, God’s goodness never changes, and everything that comes out of him is good yesterday, today, and tomorrow. Humans who find themselves suffering under evil are then to align themselves with this goodness—as God is perfect, we are to be perfect. So, whether it is science or a myth, Genesis’s first chapter is a treatise on God’s goodness in the

form of the law. Thus regardless of type, we have our basic theological formula: God = good = law.

Both genres assume what Darwin assumes, that God is not-preached. But this stands opposed to the point of Psalm 33, for a prominent example, in which the Creator is inescapably the preached God: "By the word of the LORD the heavens were made, and by the breath of his mouth all their host. . . . For he spoke, and it came to be; he commanded, and it stood firm" (vv. 6, 9). Here we meet a theological crossroads. We can either take up creation and Genesis 1 without a preacher, or with one. More to the point, we can take creation itself, or life, with or without a preacher. Modern life is precisely the choice of the one path that has no preacher. This is a choice, a project, a desire, and a will—all of these—and just so a bondage that demands its God and creation to be without any word of promise—taken straight up according to the law alone. Theologically this produces a "general" doctrine of God (*de deo uno*), whether it is myth or science that assumes God is hiding. As long as God hides we have no choice but to live life without reference to him/it/her.

(S)ELECTION

No one has described this situation of life without a preacher better than Charles Darwin, who purportedly rejected his Christian faith, as much as that is possible, prior to the voyage of the *Beagle*. That means his description of life without a preacher came not because of what he discovered on the Galápagos Islands but because he could not theoretically bear a world back in jolly England in which a preacher elected him outside the law. Perhaps there weren't many Anglicans willing to do it anymore. After all, who can bear the exclusivity of Christ and the contingency of hearing a preacher? This chance is something akin to the very contingency (variation, difference) that Darwin was about to rediscover in another place and location within the mystery of heredity, only this time presumably without God to blame. So he did what any red-blooded man without a preacher would do. He rebelled against the election by God through a preached word of gospel and came to hate predestination and the gospel. This decision is the expression in a man's life of the *Enlightenment*, which is at root none other than the attempt to be rid of preachers once and for all. Who would not approve of that, if it could be done? Indeed, it is true that one can easily elude a preacher (it happens all the time), but what is discovered instead is the constant law revealed in "nature," and nature allows no pious dreams of God rewarding the good or throwing grace and mercy into judgments.

The hidden God operated just like Darwin did with his doves—that is, as a breeder, whose attention rests on the thesis of heredity that "like produces like."¹ Even Darwin didn't know why this was the case, as there was yet no gene theory

¹Charles Darwin, *The Origin of Species*, ed. Gillian Beer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996) 12.

available, but he knew that breeders depended upon a sire producing something like himself. So Darwin famously asked, How do varieties of creatures arise if like produces like? The answer lay in having breeders *select* traits they desire: like produces like, but little variations from parents occur. Breeders choose the variations they want, and thus the “breed” or species is born. So, Darwin says, “In Saxony, the importance of the principle of selection in regard to merino sheep is so fully recognized, that men follow it as a trade; the sheep are placed on a table and are studied, like a picture by a connoisseur...the sheep are each time marked and classed, so that the very best may ultimately be selected for breeding.”² The same is true of a gardener with her beans. Darwin notes the book of Genesis speaks often about this matter of breeding, especially with the story of Jacob.

Now if one wants a new breed it is gotten only gradually, with the breeder directing variations over time. But imagine if a breeder had not just weeks, but thousands and thousands of years to ply her trade. Then small changes over time would produce many variations that could be called *species*. This would not happen through a human decision, but through a power that transcends individual breeders, and is “by far the predominant Power.”³ With this, Darwin began capitalizing the word “Selection” in his tome as that ultimate power’s name—the great, hidden, silent breeder overseeing all of nature.

Darwin called these collections of species produced by the breeding life-force “nature”—which is therefore the product of Selection. Large species, like doves, have the most variations in their ranks and so become dominant. The strong get stronger: “throughout nature the forms of life which are now dominant tend to become still more dominant by leaving many modified and dominant descendants.”⁴

STRUGGLE

Darwin then asked, How are the variations Selected over time to fit in nature so that they are perfected or dominate? His answer was meant to overcome what he assumed was the teaching of the church in Genesis 1. Perfection is, after all, a legal word. In misguided churches, perfection is distorted to mean morally fulfilling the law as an act of personal virtue. But Darwin recognized that the law does not work that way. Law’s purpose is not for producing virtue, it has another role, which is to limit overpopulation by making life a struggle. Law justifies no one. Selection is “natural,” not virtuous: “We have seen that man by selection can certainly produce great results.... But Natural Selection, as we shall hereafter see, is a power incessantly ready for action, and is as immeasurably superior to man’s feeble efforts, as the works of Nature are to those of Art.”⁵

Selection limits population, but it does it wisely—the strong survive. In turn,

²Ibid., 28.

³Ibid., 37.

⁴Ibid., 50.

⁵Ibid., 52–54 and following quotations.

“strong” simply means what the Unseen Breeder (i.e., Natural Selection) prefers. Life without a preacher is then given to us in one of Darwin’s brilliant phrasings: “We behold the face of nature bright with gladness, we often see superabundance of food; we do not see, or we forget that the birds which are idly singing round us mostly live on insects or seeds, and are thus constantly destroying life; or we forget how largely these songsters, or their eggs, or their nestlings, are destroyed by birds and beasts of prey; we do not always bear in mind, that though food may be now superabundant, it is not so at all seasons of each recurring year.” There is a realistic picture indeed, including our nice songbirds!

Darwin’s real problem with the first chapter of Genesis is not the six days, but the command of God that has no restraint: “be fruitful and multiply.” Darwin notes with horror: “There is no exception to this rule.” Any God who would command that sort of thing would be foolish indeed.

The problem in nature, which requires a Natural Selector, is that “a struggle for existence inevitably follows from the high rate at which all organic beings tend to increase. Every being (which during its natural lifetime produces several eggs or seeds) must suffer destruction during some period of its life, otherwise, on the principle of geometrical increase, its numbers would quickly become so inordinately great that no country could support the product.” This is the doctrine of Malthus, as Darwin noted, which must be applied to the whole of animal and vegetable life. The problem for the animal kingdom is that there is no change in this geometry for “prudential restraint from marriage.” Life without a preacher is an orgy of marriage; since sex is for procreation, Darwin’s real problem with the first chapter of Genesis is not the six days, but the command of God that has no restraint: “be fruitful and multiply.” Darwin notes with horror: “There is no exception to this rule.” Any God who would command that sort of thing would be foolish indeed.

So, in place of the empty space left by a feckless God with no limits on procreation (as preached by foolish ministers of the church), nature steps in to select. The consolation, Darwin concludes, is that “when we reflect on this struggle, we may console ourselves with the full belief, that the war of nature is not incessant, that no fear is felt, that death is generally prompt, and that the vigorous, the healthy, and the happy survive and multiply.”⁶ The theologian of glory always gives the best picture possible of life without a preacher. At least death is generally prompt for the weak. What checks unlimited growth? The amount of food, serving as prey, climate, epidemics—and all these things we summarize as “nature.” Mother Nature is a better selector than a preacher in the end because she uses reason rather than

⁶*Ibid.*, 66.

feeling. If the results make humans shudder, you should know that Nature has a higher end than individuals.

SEXUAL SELECTION

Here Darwin is led to the second kind of struggle in the world without a preacher. That is, not survival, but procreation—thriving, being fruitful, and so Sexual Selection: “This depends not on a struggle for existence, but on a struggle between the males for possession of the females; the result is not death to the unsuccessful competitor, but few or no offspring.”⁷ How well do you produce your like? In fact, the real decision is not left to the male, but the female, as Darwin noted: “The rock-thrush of Guiana, birds of Paradise, and some others, congregate; and successive males display their gorgeous plumage and perform strange antics before the females, which standing by as spectators, at last choose the most attractive partner.”⁸ Of course, it is not simply the female that does the selecting, but the ultimate power of Nature: “If we then have under nature variability and a powerful agent always ready to act and select... what limit can be put to this power, acting during long ages and rigidly scrutinizing the whole constitution, structure, and habits of each creature, favouring the good and rejecting the bad? I can see no limit to this power, in slowly and beautifully adapting each form to the most complex relations of life.” Mother Nature is almighty. We live under her eternal law. She (s)elects with no one to limit her, which partially reveals the hidden God by means of the inescapable laws of struggle and sexual reproduction.

Darwin recognized that nature’s life without a preacher is *forensic*: being judged and judging. Expressed biologically, this says life concerns the chosen and unchosen so that the meaning of life is simply procreation. Breeding is quickly done, and when it is finished, ends in swift death even for those most successful at it. So, Darwin found “Mother Nature” was nothing other than a breeder. A Breeder is a [S]elector, so that he ended his life running from one Elector—the preacher—to another. In Mother Nature, at least, he found a sensible, legitimate election that did not subject him to a God who chooses losers by means of making his Son another loser sent to find one lost sheep while foolishly leaving the ninety-nine good-producing stock.

What is Nature’s purpose? It is not to select and preserve individuals, as he had been taught at church. Nature is strewn with dead and dying birds, fish, and people for whom the Mother cares not. Instead, she operates at a level above the individual, preserving and altering large groups of general likeness known as species. At the start, creation is a rather rowdy bundle of diversity that needs someone to breed it toward a useful goal. That is, creatures must be perfected not as individuals but groups. A breeder of pigeons does this by an aesthetic (“I think this sort of bird is pretty, I’ll make more”) or a practical choice (“I think this kind of bird is useful

⁷Ibid., 73.

⁸Ibid., 74.

to me, it flies farther to deliver messages"). Yet, Nature is not so fickle as to be merely aesthetic, so how does she make her decisions practically? Through *struggle*. All creatures want to increase, and so they bump up against each other for limited space and resources. Yet, it is not just the strong who survive—it is the ones who are most well suited to fit Mother Nature—her climate and available prey—which Darwin calls “adaptability.”

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Unlimited growth is not what the Mother wants—it is Planned Parenthood. But it is her plan, not ours. Adaptability to her conditions is the meaning of life. Perfection requires variation (diversity) and patience—a *long* time—to encourage nearly unnoticeable differences in the direction that eons reveal as Mother's choice. So while struggle creates a “natural” rather than ecclesial selection, the point is to get used to your particular place in her system. What role do you play? What is your meaning in life? Mother Nature never speaks, but the answer becomes obvious over a long enough stretch. How important are you to Nature? Not very. Darwin is teaching personal humility, which was once the specialty of the church and Augustine, but now is the habitation of the scientist. What the monks tried to attain by cloister, we now must attain through painstaking accumulation of data.

Meanwhile, without a preacher you will have only Mother Nature—the Breeder. That means, your role in her work is procreation. You reproduce, and by this, perhaps, will add some small variation in life that is preferred by her in the cosmic plan over a nearly infinite expanse of life. This is your meaning, your destiny, your fate. Primarily this means accepting the fact that individuals do not matter. Mother likes identifiable “groups,” not individuals. You must also accept the fact that the struggle for existence is necessary on a grand scale, even though you yourself will lose in every single case. Procreate and die, this is your Mother's law.

Interestingly enough, this role in nature's plan also involves *trust* because we cannot “see” these changes. We must very carefully lay out a host of linked evidence over a long period of time by which we may imagine, but never see, the big picture Mother Nature sees. Yet for theology it is important to note that trust is precisely in the law, not the gospel—specifically the “law of nature.”⁹ One would have to hope that this law is eternal, necessary, inescapable, and inevitable so that our real purpose is getting used to the necessity of our own deaths for the sake of

⁹Ibid., 381.

life, greening things by reducing the world of useless population and helping to orient the species in the proper direction through the proper use of sex.

PREACHED OR UNPREACHED

The first chapter of Genesis is either the preached God speaking, or is the myth/science of the unpreached God. Darwin's is a particular telling of the story of Adam and Eve since he assumes that in the beginning there were only a "few forms," or preferably one: "There is a grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having been originally breathed by the Creator into a few forms or into one; and that, whilst this planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being evolved."¹⁰ So ends the *Origin of Species*. We have to get over wanting to survive as individuals while the planet cycles according to fixed law. If we can do that, then we will be free. Mother Nature loves groups, not individuals. So Darwin concluded: "Finally, it may not be a logical deduction, but to my imagination it is far more satisfactory to look at such instincts as the young cuckoo ejecting its foster-brothers,—ants making slaves,—the larvae of ichneumonidae feeding within the live bodies of caterpillars, not as specially endowed or created instincts, but as small consequences of one general law, leading to the advancement of all organic beings, namely, multiply, vary, let the strongest live and the weakest die." That is the satisfactory law by which nature selects, and it is far better than to have a preached God who has mercy on whomever he wills.

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The preacher in Genesis is not taking issue with Darwin's depiction of life that starts in one and depends utterly on procreation. Indeed, that is largely the point. But yet, that priestly account knows something Darwin does not: God's words are not simply law, but gospel. There is a command with the threat of death, but also a promise that is free: "do not eat...you may eat..." This preacher is not afraid of God choosing individuals, especially the wrong kind. Nor is this preacher afraid of the vast numbers of life in the midst of destruction currently underway. Indeed, the preacher is free to depend upon something other than Natural Selection; namely, a preached selection of the ungodly (while they are yet ungodly) made by the promise given to Adam and Eve before sin, and then again after it.

¹⁰Ibid., 396.

That means, despite the law, that I must make an historical confession. God has chosen me—he has created me, body and soul with all their powers—and put me in a zoo of other life, which will not overwhelm or take anything from me, but is turned to my benefit in the form of a promise. God's promise to me does not end in order to keep the laws of nature alive, but lives beyond the law.

Is it any wonder why a person would prefer the law's death to the gospel? Darwin did not reject the beginning of Genesis as a preached God because its science is faulty, but because its divine election is appalling. God elects humans over plants for no legal reasons. God elects Jews who had become idolaters and were taken away to Babylon, only to be freed by Cyrus, the strangest of all Messiahs. God's priests then spoke the words of Genesis 1 as the preached God. Yet, as Darwin travelled around the world he naturally asked, what about all these people who have never had a preacher? What about the unnamed animals of Galápagos? There must be a more rational way God operates than that. Why not make God into a silent pigeon breeder? So Darwin bravely went about discovering life without a preacher. Indeed, that life seems to be a much better arrangement than the election by baptism in opposition to the law—unless, of course, you are the weak. ⊕

STEVEN PAULSON is professor of theology at Luther Seminary, Saint Paul, Minnesota. He is the author of Luther for Armchair Theologians and editor of A More Radical Gospel, The Captivation of the Will, and The Preached God, collections of materials by Gerhard Forde.